

Editorial: Tyre Nichols' death is a call for character

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Black History Month begins this year with heavy hearts. Just days before Feb. 1, the Memphis Police Department released video of Tyre Nichols' interaction with members of MPD's SCORPION unit, an interaction that ended in Nichols' hospitalization and death three days later.

Contained but unstated in that general summary of events on Jan. 7 are many details under investigation. No one debates the summarized facts. There will be plenty of debate—and already is—about the details.

For those of us not directly involved in the investigation, however, particularly those of us who follow Christ, the basic facts are a sufficient call to us to embody the character of Christ in this world in this time.

And so, I call Christ-followers to put on the character of Christ and to move in two directions—forward and backward—at the same time.

The character of Christ

Paul describes the character of Christ—what he calls “the same mindset as Christ Jesus”—in plain and poetic terms.

“Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Paul’s description of Jesus is so plain and poetic, it almost offends our sensibilities. We struggle to act like that “in [our] relationships with one another,” as Paul calls us to do.

Prior to his description of Christ’s character, he exhorted his readers in Philippi to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:2-4).

Paul wasn’t talking about our skill or ability. He was talking about our character. He was talking about the soil from which our actions toward others grow. Are our actions growing out of the soil of Christ or self?

Character of the body

Living as an individual in this world clothed in the character of Christ is a daunting proposition, like being thrown to the wolves—or into the lions’ den. Yes, it’s a frightful proposition to be called, each of us individually, to embody the character of Christ in this world.

But we are not called only individually. *We* are called as a body. Imagine what happens, then, when as the body of Christ—the collective of Christ-followers—we embody the character of Christ in this world.

To put some skin and bone on this image, let’s consider that the Baptist General Convention of Texas includes about 5,300 churches. For the sake of argument, let’s say each of those 5,300 churches has 100 active

members. In reality, the number differs in each church, but round numbers are easier to work with and will serve the purpose.

A convention of 5,300 churches, each with 100 active members, amounts to a body of 530,000 people. Imagine if 530,000 people—individually and all together—embodied the character of Christ described by Paul. By Christ, they would change the world.

And remember, that's only *part* of the total body of Christ in Texas alone. There are many more Baptist groups and Christian denominations just in Texas, not to mention elsewhere. Imagine if all of them also embodied the character of Christ described by Paul. By Christ, they absolutely would change the world.

Furthermore, remember that each individual in this massive body of Christ-followers works, goes to school and lives in every stratum of society. Some hold positions of great worldly power and influence. Some hold immense material wealth. Some have extensive networks. All have relationships and capabilities.

Imagine if each one acted in the world from the soil of Christ's character—not seeking godhood, living as a servant, obeying God even at the cost of their own life, not being selfish or conceited but humble, looking out for the interests of others. If we all were like that, Christ's ministry of reconciliation would be far more evident in our world.

Responding in Christ's character

Since we do live in a world frequented by tragedy—and Tyre Nichols' death is a tragedy—the character of Christ described above must be embodied in two directions at the same time. It must move backward in response and also proactively forward in preparation.

Embodying Christ's character backwards looks like providing disaster relief ministry to first responders—[as Tennessee Baptists were invited to do](#)—and also to protestors, which we certainly can do.

One way we can minister to protestors is to listen, hear them out, believe their cries for relief. Humility, servanthood and seeking the interests of others can do this.

I asked Rev. Oza Jones, director of African American Ministries for the BGCT, for help understanding the pain his community is expressing. It may be hard to read his words, but love listens.

“It appears, nowadays, addressing police brutality has become commonplace. Tyre Nichols’ murder at the hands of Memphis police officers is appalling, heinous and visually horrific. It is so traumatizing that the video is extremely difficult to watch.

“As a father of Black boys, my fear is my sons will fall into the hands of a bully with a badge—those who swore an oath to protect and serve but end up maiming and murdering. These cops needed to be fired and need to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

“One cannot help but wonder, however, why was the arrest so swift in this case but apparently slow in many of the other cases? This situation reminds me of two incidents in the Bible.

“First, I am reminded of Moses when he went out to see about his people and saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. The next day, he saw a Hebrew beating another Hebrew. Regardless of Moses’s actions, the fact Moses was incensed at both is understandable and appreciated.

“The second is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Memphis cops are like the robbers who beat the man and left him half dead. The fireman and the EMTs parallel the priest and Levite who failed to render aid in the

proper time.

“This fiasco in Memphis and other police brutality cases reveals the depth of human depravity and what that depravity looks like when you give a person a badge and lethal weaponry.”

Do his words provoke anger in you—not at the situation, but at him? Christlike compassion doesn’t lash out at the hurting. Our Christlike response—the backward movement—is to listen and to believe the Black community is in pain and to demonstrate compassion toward them.

Growing in Christ’s character

Christ’s character also moves forward, what we often call the advance or growth of God’s kingdom. More specifically, the character Paul describes was required for the gospel to come into this world and for the gospel to continue moving forward in this world.

I think Pastor Bartholomew Orr of Brown Missionary Baptist Church in Southaven, Miss., would include these two movements in “[a holistic approach](#)” that addresses the many facets of ... evil,” such as “preventing police brutality.”

To prevent injustice, we must work in advance, preparing our lives in Christlikeness, inculcating and integrating the character of Christ so thoroughly into ourselves that it governs all our interactions going forward. This preparation must not only be individual, but it must be collective.

So, I call the body of Christ wherever you are—whether in churches, schools, businesses, governments and elsewhere—to grow in and embody Christ’s character now. Grow from the soil of Christ’s character so God’s justice and righteousness will overtake injustice and make right what is wrong in this world.

Though I'm nearly 50 years old, I still have enough idealism to believe Christ would not have expected us to follow him if it wasn't possible to do so. The present moment is a call to us to follow him by embodying his character and stepping into the pain around us—like it or not—to be about Christ's reconciling work.

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