

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***Biblical Christianity and the Tragedies in Ferguson and New York City***

Since late summer and now into the fall of 2014, a series of tragedies involving young black men and the police have fueled tensions in several urban centers in the United States. In each, emotions and pent-up anger have caused significant strain and, in some cases, rioting within the black community. And the manner in which the national media has covered each one of these events has usually exacerbated the mistrust and tension. For the various constituencies involved, past assumptions and current perceptions have shaped the respective responses to these tragedies. There are also significant differences between each case, making generalizations impossible or at least not very helpful. The complexity and harshness of these tragedies mandate that we who name the name of Christ respond to these heart-rending situations with empathy, compassion and grace. Several thoughts:

- First of all, one of the bedrock values of American civilization is rule of law. Historical cases of injustice have driven the perception that mob rule is the answer to the perceived breakdown of rule of law in Ferguson, Missouri. But as theologian Albert Mohler argues, “The rule of law cannot be improved, nor corrected—much less reformed—by lawlessness.” Unacceptably, arsonists and looters expressed their outrage when the grand jury in Ferguson did not indict the police officer who shot Michael Brown last August. Rule of law is intended to defend civilized people against the mob. It is quite crucial to remember that the grand jury system itself is a significant civil right all Americans enjoy; a right rooted deeply in the US Constitution. Theologian Albert Mohler summarizes the importance of this right: “Grand juries, made up of ordinary citizens in the community, exist as a buffer between the police, the prosecutors, and the people; and prosecutors are prevented from bringing frivolous charges on inadequate evidence against an individual. That is a very important protection the US Constitution grants us.” Another important dimension of the Ferguson situation is that the social media (and television) have fired the passions of those who believe an injustice was done. Columnist Kathleen Parker has correctly observed that “Many have lauded the power of social media in liberating people from the bonds of shamed silence. This technological development makes it possible for people who have felt too timid, afraid or disenfranchised to step forward. While this is certainly true and valuable to an extent, social media have enormous destructive power. This intersection of freedom and responsibility has rarely been so vivid and presents new challenges to the personal moral code that undergirds our legal system.”
- Second, there is a significant difference between the case of 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and the case of Eric Garner, an asthmatic father of six and grandfather

of two, in New York City. Both involved grand juries who weighed the evidence against a policeman and both declined to issue an indictment.

1. In the Michel Brown case (as the *Washington Post* reported) the grand jury “declined to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager, resolving a secretive, months-long legal saga and reigniting powerful frustrations about America’s policing of African-Americans.” The decision by the grand jury of nine whites and three blacks found no probable cause to bring an indictment against Officer Wilson. The grand jury in Ferguson considered between 60 and 70 hours of testimony, including a face-to-face testimony of Darren Wilson himself, who appeared before the grand jury without his attorney being present. It is instructive that the media consistently presented Michael Brown in photos of him when he was much younger, not the 6-foot, 290-pound 18-year old that he was when he assaulted Officer Wilson in his police vehicle, punched him in the face and then tried to take his weapon from him. The subsequent shooting of Michael Brown occurred as he, after fleeing the police vehicle, turned and moved again toward Officer Wilson. The forensic evidence of the Medical Examiner confirmed the account of Officer Wilson.
  2. In the Eric Garner case, the context is completely different. Garner was approached because the police believed he was selling loose cigarettes, an evasion of taxes in New York. His struggle with Officer Daniel Pantaleo was captured on video, with little doubt about what actually occurred. Pantaleo reacted to Garner’s resistance by using what seems rather clearly to be a throat-choking hold. Garner cried out 11 times, “I can’t breathe.” He died as a result. Even conservative columnists agree that the Garner case is rather clear. Sean Davis, founder of the conservative Web magazine, the *Federalist* writes: “The Eric Garner murder is pretty much a slam-dunk second-degree manslaughter at the very least.” Respected columnist Charles Krauthammer perceives the Garner grand jury decision as “totally incomprehensible. . . It looks as if . . . they might have indicted him [Pantaleo] on something like involuntary manslaughter at the very least. The guy actually said, ‘I can’t breathe,’ which ought to be a signal if the guy was unarmed, and the crime was as petty as they come.” Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, stated that “The Garner case is much clearer in terms of the facts of the case . . . [but the Garner and Ferguson cases] brought up many conversations within churches and within our denomination, about experiences that black Christians face that white Christians just don’t.”
- Finally, how should Christians respond to these tragedies? From the biblical worldview, what does justice and love look like? First, it involves an empathy that is only supernatural. As Mohler suggests, “the ability to empathize is an ability to understand every single human being around us as our neighbor.” To love your neighbor, as Jesus commanded, is to empathize. It is difficult for those of us who are white to understand

the perception in the black community that the historical injustice shown to blacks throughout American history does not still obtain today for them. The perception of injustice is real and powerful. We must understand this! Second, as Christians, we must remember that God created both the family and the state as foundational institutions to provide the basis for stability and order in civilization. When these institutions break down, so will order and stability. Community and trust in these institutions is a part of the necessary order and stability of society. If community and trust break down we must seek to restore them. Christians should lead in this. Third, we must remember that the core issue of the human condition is sin. Sin affects everything in our society—people, society’s institutions and the resulting injustice that often pervades the implementation of our laws and the adjudication of those laws. For that reason, only the gospel and the subsequent transformation that it brings will help America rebuild these institutions. These institutions must work and function equitably and justly for all citizens, not just whites. For that reason, Christians and the nation must address questions relating to race and the law, law enforcement injustices and how righteousness and mercy connect with the rule of law. Our nation has a formidable assignment in this area—and Christians should lead the way with empathy, compassion and love—all centered in the Lord Jesus Christ.

See Karen Tumulty in the *Washington Post* (5 December 2014); Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (25 November 2014); and Albert Mohler in [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (21 August 2014 and 1 December 2014).