

How Killer Mike helped me rethink the work of Christian activism

Protesting in Jesus' name is an outward act that yields inner transformation.

by [Johnathan C. Richardson](#) in the [August 26, 2020](#) issue



TOWARD JUSTICE: Killer Mike argues that protest should be a catalyst, not just catharsis. (Photo by Erin Cecil / Treefort Music Fest via Creative Commons)

When rapper Killer Mike came to the podium in Atlanta one night at the height of the city's recent Black Lives Matter protests, the usual emotional distance between the viewer and the televised disappeared. I felt what he was going to say before he said it. The words were written all over his face. Killer Mike, an Atlanta native and the son of a police officer, was prophetic. Watching from my home in New Orleans, I immediately thought, *He can come into my pulpit anytime.*

Killer Mike understood that the protest would not reach its full expression if, in its aftermath, there were no measurable gains. "It is your duty not to burn your own house down for anger with an enemy," he said. "Fortify your own house so that you may be a house of refuge in time of organization. Now, is the time to plot, plan,

strategize, organize, and mobilize.”

He stressed the importance of these protests rising above the cathartic to become a catalyst for measurable, sustainable strategy and empowered action. To this end, he offered some suggestions: “Make sure you fill out your census.” “Exercise your political bully power by going to local elections.” “Bring back the community review board.” “Talk to ten of your friends . . . come up with real solutions.”

All this is good and important work. Yet I found myself wondering if it was enough. Killer Mike’s focus, emotionally and prophetically, was on what we should do. But how are protesters themselves being changed through the work of protest? What are the internal dynamics of protesting?

This distinction between external and internal did not dawn on me immediately. I was led to consider the internal component of protest because of a small but important aspect of Christian prayer. Christians do not just pray; we pray in Jesus’ name. I began to ask, in light of Killer Mike’s speech, what does it mean to protest in Jesus’ name? If Christians do not just protest but do so in Jesus’ name, then what difference does protest make in the life of the protester? Could protest be understood as a Christian practice like prayer, baptism, or Eucharist?

In other words, is there a formational aspect to protest? By formational I mean that what we do with our bodies—where they are located and what happens to them—teaches and changes us. The body teaches the heart to desire certain ends. One of the ways it can do this is through the act of protest.

By formational I also mean that Christians protest from within the Christian story. In the case of the protests over George Floyd’s death, we embody a response to the commandment, “Thou shalt not murder.” As we protest, we hone our inner desire for the kingdom of God where that commandment is heeded by all.

“Like all concrete beings, man occupies a place in physical space,” writes Abraham Joshua Heschel in *Who Is Man?* “However, unlike other beings, his authentic existence goes on in an inner space.” Heschel’s insight calls me to acknowledge a connection between the external place of human beings and the internal space of human beings. While Heschel says that the “authentic existence” of a person is in the internal space, I would say that the internal space and external place exist in mutual relation, like two magnets being drawn together.

Killer Mike's recommendations for external expressions of ongoing protest and justice work are concerned with the creation of a virtuous society, the external space. But in order for that external space to be fully realized, we have to also do the inner work of honing our desires. In God's story, the practice of murder is deprived of meaning and value, while the practice of hospitality grows in meaning and value. But Christians have to learn to inhabit this story, both internally and externally. One of the ways we learn to do this is by protest. Another is by reflecting on protest and letting that experience change us. Both are necessary.

Killer Mike's vision of justice requires the development of virtues like courage and patience that can only be achieved by those who have, in various ways, embarked upon what we might call an internal transformation in which protest plays a part. I haven't always seen it this way. Not long ago, I was speaking with a Christian brother about injustice. He was, as my grandmother would say, "good white folk." In the midst of our conversation about racial injustice, he mentioned the importance of Christian virtues.

I dismissed him. I said what many black people have said to white people talking about morality many times before: "You white folks always talking about moral behavior and virtues to those of us who are oppressed. Rather than getting your foot off our necks, you try to pacify us with appeals to morality and virtues. If asked, not one white person would trade places with a black person. Walk a day in my shoes, and let's see if you're still talking about morality and virtues. You have never been oppressed; you have that luxury."

He rendered the appropriate deference to my critique but did not back away from his view. He responded, "Johnathan, my friend and brother, you're right, I have never been oppressed. But don't you think that even the oppressed should not be narcissists?" To this I had to agree. As a pastor in love with the politics of Jesus, I have come across too many Christians—of different races and sexual orientations, conservative and liberal views, rich and poor, trained and untrained—who feed or excuse their narcissism and other vices through an appeal to their belief in justice, piety, liberation, reconciliation, and redemption.

Christian protest—like Eucharist, like baptism—aims at transforming a whole person. How strong can a desire for justice be if a person is mired in selfishness or cowardice? There is no separation between the practice of protest and the development of these inner virtues. Virtue is embedded in the act of protest. But the

Christian protester also reflects on what has been learned through the practice of protest in order to carry it forward into what Christians mean when we say we live a life with God. The desire for justice might lead a person to protest. Protest as a practice might also cultivate a desire for justice—and the courage to pursue it.

Put this way, protest is a fundamental Christian practice: it manifests desires like justice and peace, it cultivates these desires along with the virtues required to practice them, and all the while it expresses the story in which Christians are embedded.

Christians protest as people embedded in a particular story of God's salvation and God's redemption. We don't choose this story; it is chosen for us. Imagine being hired as an actor on *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. The nature of the show determines how you and the actors around you behave. There is a broader narrative into which you have been invited. You wouldn't be hired to play a character who kills Mr. Rogers. That would not be intelligible within the logic of the show.

In Christian protest, we are performers in the story of God, in which certain practices are intelligible because they make sense inside the story. Christian protest is not only a protest against specific regimes of power with specific histories, although it is that. It is also a protest against the failures of the human being to live fully into God's vision, and it participates in God's story of redemption.

This is why protest is so important. It is an embodied practice that changes both the inner person and the outer world. We learn from other protesters. We learn from putting ourselves into the space of protest. We learn as our bodies make the gestures and sounds of protest. The critical point is that Christians must learn to feel rather than think ourselves through the world, with the body as our teacher.

When Kobe Bryant would practice shooting, his body would tell him when the rim was not the right height. The rim may have been off by just a few millimeters, but he did not have to measure. His body felt the rim was not at the correct height. Kobe did not have to think about it; in fact thinking about it would have done him no good. He felt it. As Christians we learn what the city of God is and how to participate in it through embodied practice in which the body is truly more important than the mind. The mind follows the body.

How do we protest in Jesus' name? Killer Mike's inspiring speech pointed to only part of the story. The other part is the interior space, the part of protest that attends to

inner reflection and the way the body teaches us how to be participants in God's kingdom. Killer Mike's plea to the people of Atlanta to "plot, plan, strategize, organize, and mobilize" is one every Christian who protests should heed—while never forgetting the story in which we are embedded.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Protesting in Jesus' name."