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Churches should embrace the Richard Shermans of the world

Mariam Williams | Jan. 27, 2014 At the Intersection

On Jan. 19, Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman gave a post-game interview [1] that lit up social media with a debate on the politics of respectability. I followed an interaction on Twitter between a local political reporter [2] who's also a 30-year-old African-American man and the senior pastor of Louisville's largest black church [3] and the city's second-largest megachurch [4], with 8,000 members.

The pastor's first tweet after Sherman's interview invoked Martin Luther King Jr., first saying Sherman's behavior dishonored King's memory and sacrifice, then adding [5], " 'Yet negroes must b honest...we r often 2 loud and boisterous' M.L. King, Stride toward freedom, p 99." (He shortened the quote to fit Twitter's 140-character limit, but yes, he really included a page number in the tweet.) Others joined the conversation or started conversations of their own by calling Sherman a "thug."

The reporter retorted with a tweet [6] about "house negroes" criticizing Sherman "like he was a runaway slave" and later accused the pastor [7] of "shuffling and yessa bossing for white folks." At some point, the reporter tweeted [8], "I guess the politics of respectability will never end in some circles ... Like I said, some of us are bold."

I found the debate hilarious, fascinating and disturbing for two reasons: 1) This happened the same week my African-American literature professor assigned Claude McKay's novel *Banjo: a story without a plot*, which is set in 1927 in France, and the tweets I was seeing that night could have been lifted from the pages of the book; and 2) a pastor led the charge against a person who fits the very demographic he and his church claim they work hard to save -- that is, to save *for* Christ and *from* the streets.

As I wrote in my first post [9] for this blog, black Christian activists with the best of intentions have a history of "slipping into Pharisaic world views and judgment" against the people they say they want to lift up or help, and it often has been in an effort to prove to white people that blacks deserved the basic human rights whites were withholding from them. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, the text from which the pastor borrowed, King understood the systemic racism as "the basic cause of [the Negro's] lagging standards," even as he urged blacks to make personal improvements by raising their standards. He also strongly suggested blacks demonstrate quiet, calm, dignified behavior as part of a larger nonviolent resistance strategy.

The pastor on Jan. 19 called Sherman's "get n your face, no respect for anyone" behavior "emblematic" of the "hip hop culture [that] has eroded the values of black America" and that reinforces actions that lead to young black men and women to kill one another.

Now, according to Pew Research Center's last Religious Landscapes report [10], young adults aged 18-29 make up 24 percent of the membership at historically black Protestant churches, and men make up 40 percent of the membership. I couldn't find a statistic for 18- to 29-year-old males, but I say anecdotally and through a quick scan of the congregation at my own black megachurch that demographic is sparse. I can verify [11] that among all Christian denominations, 59 percent of young people leave the church after age 15, and their reasons for doing so include viewing Christianity as "stifling, fear-based and risk-averse" and the church as "ignoring the

problems of the real world."

Richard Sherman is 24. He's from Compton, Calif., a city Sherman himself acknowledges [12] is associated with gangsters and thuggery. It's also a city where, like Jim Crow-era Montgomery, Ala., African-Americans show "lagging standards" because of systemic racism. And as both a character in *Banjo* said in 1927 and poet, author and activist Olivia Cole pointed out in 2014 [13], racism denies black people their humanity by condemning them even for expressing boundless joy. All the "real world" problems the pastor ignored.

The following Tuesday, the good reverend humbly conceded and sent the reporter a tweet [14] saying, "thanks for the correction on Richard Sherman....he is a whole lot greater and more inspirational than what I was on Sunday!" A good start for efforts to get and keep more Shermans in the church.

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