

# NOT GUILTY?

## Reflections on the Zimmerman Verdict

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*“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.<sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:12, 13)*

In 1963, following the racially motivated bombing of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church which claimed the lives of four little black girls, Dr. King said, "...They have something to say to each of us in their death...They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers."

Fifty years later, we mourn once again, not only for the death of another black child, Trayvon Martin, but for the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. In a recent press conference, President Barack Obama echoed Dr. King's concern for the same "system" or "way of life" that undermines the value and dignity of blacks in this nation, saying that this common "set of experiences" is painful to African Americans and shapes our interpretation of the jury verdict for George Zimmerman.

In spite of media claims that the notion of a racially biased criminal justice system in America is a myth, the facts speak clearly to the contrary. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

The Center for American Progress, the Washington, D.C.-based think tank, has listed some interesting statistics in an article titled, "The Top 10 Most Startling Facts about People of Color and Criminal Justice in the United States":

- People of color make up about 30 percent of the U.S. population, but 60 percent of those imprisoned.
- Once convicted, Black offenders receive sentences that are 10 percent longer than White offenders for the same crimes. In addition, Blacks are 21 percent more likely to receive mandatory-minimum sentences than White defendants and 20 percent more likely to be sentenced to prison.
- Although African-Americans comprise 14 percent of regular drug users, they are 37 percent of those arrested for drug offenses.
- Although Black juveniles are approximately 16 percent of the youth population, 37 percent of their cases are moved to criminal court and 58 percent of African-American youth are sent to adult prisons.
- Blacks are twice as likely to be arrested during a traffic stop than Whites and four times as likely to experience the use of force during encounters with police.

Sadly, however, but not surprisingly, the jury has spoken and declared Zimmerman not guilty on all counts. Law enforcement agents in Florida and across the nation have spoken again and again as they have tried, convicted, brutalized and even executed other young black males without cause, in the courts of law and in the streets – telling us that the lives of black folks do not matter.

Some took false hope from the election of Barack Obama to the White House, believing that Dr. King's dream of a nation of brotherhood had been finally realized. We live in a nation where the majority of people are strangely oblivious to the proliferation of racial injustice throughout our culture. The case of George Zimmerman reminds us again of what we can hardly forget - the spirit of racism in America is alive and well. Some have naively called it a Florida problem, but this is nothing less than the unveiled face of a deeper, far-reaching evil that penetrates this nation from coast to coast.

No matter where we live, ALL of us are in danger as long as being black is a capital or criminal offense in the State of Florida. We are all in trouble as long as teenager Trayvon Martin can be shot in Sanford, FL, for being black and walking home. We are all at risk as long as teenager Jordan Davis can be shot and killed in Jacksonville, FL, for being black and listening to hip-hop music in a car. And we are all in jeopardy, as long as George Zimmerman can kill a black boy without cause and walk as a free man, while a young educated black mother from Tampa, FL, Marissa Alexander, victim of domestic violence can be given a mandatory sentence of 20 years for firing a shot to ward off her abuser, injuring no one. Dr. King was right, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

We are grieved. We are hurt. We are outraged. But we are not without hope. Indeed, "we are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." For in the resilient, victorious message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we find a profound hope that transcends the realities and exigencies of these difficult times in our nation – "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world!"

So we must continue to pray for peace and justice in our nation. We must pray for our justice system. It is a human institution - flawed, fallible and subject to human error. But we must not lose heart, because by God's grace, it is still possible for reasonable persons of moral conscience to act justly. We stand encouraged not because we are naïve and not because we have turned a blind eye or a deaf ear to the pervasive presence of injustice around us, but because we are anchored by an indomitable faith and a steadfast hope in the God who is both sovereign and omnipotent.

We are encouraged because we know that justice for Trayvon Martin and every other innocent son or daughter will be rendered in a higher court – the court of the Most High God. And to Him, every knee will bow and every soul will stand to give an account for his or her sins.

Until that day, the struggle continues. Somehow, through the enduring pain of injustice, we must come together as people of faith realizing that this is not a time for hatred and bitterness or retaliation and vengeance. We condemn violence in every form, but realize that the time to fight is now - not with wicked words and weapons, nor with fists and firearms. It is time to fight the “good fight of faith” with the only weapons that will prove effective in this warfare:

*“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4,5).*

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