

Statement on Biblical Justice and Racism
South Park Church, June, 2022

Biblical Justice and Racial reconciliation is important because:

- 1) We are all created in the image of God (“Imago Dei”),
- 2) God commands us to provide justice and care for the vulnerable and oppressed,
- 3) Jesus calls the church to love others the way He loves us,
- 4) One day all nations will worship God together, and
- 5) Sin affects, not just our personal relationships with God and others, but also society’s practices and institutions.

Imago Dei

The concept of Imago Dei was present at creation. Genesis 1:26-27 states:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. . . .” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:31 says that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Psalm 139:14 says that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” God intended for human beings to flourish in the world He created. But sin entered the world and caused people to dehumanize other people, as reflected in Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. This is reflected in the labels we use to characterize others as less than human. For example, Nazis referred to Jews as rats, Hutus involved in the Rwanda genocide called Tutsis cockroaches, and black people were called apes. When we dehumanize others, we are denying the fearful and wonderful image of God in them.

Jesus gives us the ability to fully realize the Imago Dei that God intended for us at creation, as part of the sanctification process. Romans 8:29 says that “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” 1 Cor. 3:18 says that we are being transformed into the Lord’s image. Colossians 3:10 instructs us to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

God commands us to provide justice and care for the vulnerable and oppressed

In Isaiah 1:17, God commands: “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

Isaiah 58:1-10 contains a warning and a promise regarding how God’s people should treat the oppressed:

. . . . Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways . . . ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? . . .’ Yet on the day of your

fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? . . . If you do away with the yoke of oppression . . . and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Amos 5:21-24 shows God's hatred of religious observances in the absence of justice:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . . Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

In the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus says:

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. . . . Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

The Bible is filled with similar passages about providing justice and caring for the oppressed and vulnerable.

Note that caring for the poor was a mandate, not only for individuals, but for society as a whole. Every seventh year, Exodus 23:10-11 required fields, vineyards, and olive orchards to remain unused so that "the poor among your people may get food from it." Leviticus 23:22 prohibited reaping to the edges of fields or gathering the gleanings of harvests; this food was to be left for the poor and the alien. Deut. 14:28-29 commanded that every third year, the tithe should be reserved for the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows to "come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you."

Jesus calls us to love each other

Followers of Jesus are called, not just to care for others, but to love them as well. In John 15, Jesus commands us to love each other the way Jesus loves us:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. . . . My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. . . . This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:9,10,12,17)

Clearly, our love for others is not limited to those who are like us. We are to love those whom we would otherwise despise, reject, and even treat as an enemy. In Luke 10, Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” and used the parable of the Good Samaritan—a member of an ethnic group despised and rejected by Jews—to answer the question of “Who is my neighbor?” Matthew 5:44-47 tells us to love our enemies, for “if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? . . . And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?”

All nations and peoples will worship God

Someday people of all races and nations will reign on earth and worship together in heaven. Rev. 5:9-10 says that Jesus purchased with his blood “persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” Rev. 7:9 records John’s vision: “there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

Ephesians 2:14-16 says:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Jesus has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, between people. Here in the church, “there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” Col. 3:11.

Sin affects, not just individuals, but society’s practices and institutions

So far, we have considered the vertical relationship between an individual and God, and the horizontal relationship between an individual and other people. However, sin has a pervasive and insidious effect, not just on individuals, but on our entire society and culture.

The Bible warns us not to buy into society’s values and practices. Colossians 2:8 states: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Romans 12:2 insists: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

We can see the effect of systemic sin in Ezekiel 16:49, which attributes sin, not just to the actions of a few individuals, but to a failure by the entire city to care for the poor: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”

The church needs to “disciple out” racism and injustice

We are all children of God created in his image. One day, all believers in Christ will worship him together in heaven. In the meantime, our Father wants us to get along with each other here on earth. That means surrendering our prejudices and biases, even if it pushes us out of our comfort zones. This is part of the process of sanctification and discipleship—becoming more like Jesus.

The early church in Acts 6 is a good example of the right approach. When tensions rose between Jews and Greeks, the apostles did not ignore the problem in the hope that it would go away. Instead, they dealt with it promptly. As a result, “the word of God spread,” and even large numbers of priests became believers. Our justification through the cross and regeneration by the Holy Spirit enable us to be transformed into those who are peace makers.

The process of “discipling out” racism will require much humility, gentleness, patience, and truth spoken in love. We are not interested in taking sides on political issues. Our goal is to engage cultural issues grounded in Scripture, and with hope in Christ. This is our approach for biblical justice. (See SPC’s Philosophy of Ministry and Statement of Relational Commitments.)

We need to begin with prayer. Then we need to listen with humility to each other’s stories and experiences, being quick to listen and slow to speak. The Gospel requires that SPC should be a safe place to have difficult conversations. We want to ensure that people of all races, ethnic groups, and political views feel safe, valued, and loved at SPC. Our goal is to develop relationships, make friends with, and learn from people who are different from us. After all, such people are the ones with whom we will be spending eternity in heaven worshipping God together.