

West End Presbyterian Church Pastoral Letter: The Gospel, Race, & Biblical Justice

Adopted by the West End Presbyterian Church Session
February 23, 2021

In the midst of the uncertainty and fear created by worldwide public health pandemic, communities throughout our country have experienced deepened tensions and violence arising from widely published accounts of racial injustice. We believe that the concept of race is a manmade division as, Biblically speaking, there is truly only one human race. However, for many of our black and brown brothers and sisters, experiences of racial injustice are ongoing and personal experiences. The sins of racial injustice and oppression are not confined to our nation's past; they are sins that, according to Scripture, have existed for thousands of years and remain entrenched in our institutions and culture today.

The community of Richmond has been front and center to demonstrations of racial frustration and unrest, leaving many with unanswered questions. These are not abstract issues. They involve real people. We are left asking God, "What does this all mean? Why does this seem like an unsolvable situation? How should I be thinking about this? How can we be part of the solution rather than perpetuating the problem? How should the local church address this issue?"

In recent years, the General Assembly of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, has addressed Race and Biblical Justice through various overtures and statements. A 2004 [Pastoral Letter on Racism](#) says,

As we address the issue of race, we do so not because it is politically correct, or out of any pressure from outward society, but simply because it is our desire that the convicting and restoring power of God's grace in the Gospel be applied to the manifestations of racial sin of which we ourselves are guilty, and that those who experience the negative effects of these sins might know the healing power of God's grace – that we who have been reconciled to God through Christ might become together a holy temple in the Lord, reconciled to one another by His Spirit ([Ephesians 2:20–22](#)).

God's grace provides the only means to conquer our fears, remove our guilt, resolve our anger and give us the strength to persevere as one family where Jesus Christ is Lord. We declare that the Holy Spirit is our only source of power for true unity in the Body, and that He strengthens us through daily repentance, prayer and the cleansing power of the Word.

Our desire, further, is that we as God's people will step out of our cultural comfort zone with the Gospel, to minister among our neighbors, especially among those who are different from ourselves; That all of us will search our hearts and recognize our sin, open ourselves to the examination of the Holy Spirit, and having received the grace of the Gospel, turn from it with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience ([Westminster Shorter Catechism 87](#)). That we will spur one another on to love and good deeds.

The effects of sin, suffering, and injustice are always matters with which the church, and specifically church leadership, must shepherd. Given the call for shepherding on this particular issue, the leadership of WEPC desires to reiterate our denomination's 2004 letter and express itself in this pastoral letter to express what we believe the Bible says about race and justice, both individually and corporately. Additionally, the leadership desires this letter to give reminders of God's continual and ongoing work of "uniting all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" ([Ephesians 1:10](#)), and to suggest concrete steps that can be taken to pursue racial justice and reconciliation.

As we pursue these desires, it is helpful to remember the priorities that we believe God has given to WEPC as a local church ministering in Richmond, VA:

- WEPC's Vision is to be a Biblically authentic community of faith expressing itself through love. ([Galatians 5:6](#)).
- WEPC's Mission is to make followers of Jesus who bring the Gospel to bear on every facet of life and culture. ([Isaiah 26:8](#)).
- WEPC's Core Value is that the Gospel changes everything. ([Romans 1:16](#)). This includes racial reconciliation and justice.

We desire to give a Christ-centered reason for our beliefs and our ministry as a local church. A theological vision allows us to see our culture with new eyes. It empowers us through the Gospel to not simply react to or retreat from our situation, but take initiative to understand and speak to our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, and our culture from the framework of the Scriptures.

This vision can stimulate new and creative approaches by speaking into today's many relevant and pressing cultural issues. It can help individuals and the church examine viewpoints and answer clarifying questions such as "In what specific ways has our attitude related to (racial injustice, excessive materialism, human sexuality, etc.) been more influenced by the culture's practices than by Biblical teaching?"

What Does the Scripture Teach about Race & Justice?

God's Design for Humanity

The three Persons of the Trinity love, honor, and glorify one another¹ in perfection and declare their glory in creating the cosmos.² The pinnacle of God's creation was humankind; male and female made in God's image.³ At creation, humans were imbued with an immortal soul, knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness. **God's design for all humankind is to live in perfect peace,⁴ loving, honoring and ministering to one another after the image of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

¹ *John 1:1-5, 17:5*, ² *Genesis 1; Isaiah 45:18*, ³ *Genesis 1:26-28; 5:1-5, 9:6; Acts 17:26*, ⁴ *Romans 12:9-21, 15:5*

Human Opposition to God

Christ sums up God's Law in two commandments: love the Lord your God and the second is like it, to love your neighbor.⁵ Humankind's first parents rebelled against God, seeking to usurp His authority.⁶ Through sin, humankind lost its initial righteousness and fellowship with God.⁷ In this spiritual death, humankind was corrupted and gave way to thinking and actions that oppose God and destroyed human community.⁸ Opposition to God has many expressions. It is a sin to violate — in thought, or word, or deed — God's declaration that all humanity is created with dignity and worth as image bearers.⁹ **God's Law is based on His character, and shows no partiality because of ethnic or racial status,¹⁰ but we have twisted God's diverse design and use our differences as an opportunity to elevate ourselves.¹¹**

⁵ *Matthew 22:36-40; Luke 10:25-37*, ⁶ *Genesis 3:5; Romans 5:12-20*, ⁷ *Genesis 3:21-24*, ⁸ *Genesis 11:1-9*, ⁹ *Genesis 1:26-28; Deuteronomy 1:17; Matthew 5:21-22*, ¹⁰ *Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Acts 10:34-48; James 2:1-9; I Peter 2:17*, ¹¹ *Galatians 3:28; I Corinthians 12:12-13; Romans 3:29-30*

God's New Covenant, New Creation, New People

The covenant of grace is fulfilled in Christ's perfect life, redemptive work on the Cross, and conquering of death. Christ's work removes death, suffering, injustice, sin and shame and brings unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.¹² **This covenant is meant for all people.** Here we see the ultimate and essential reconciliation: that of sinners redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ and given new life in Him. Without distinction or partiality, God graciously gives new hearts to worship, suffer and celebrate together. He has made one new family for Himself. Through the Church, God's Kingdom will be announced and He will be praised.¹³ **Christ Himself exemplifies the ministry of reconciliation, restoring broken relationships across ethnic boundaries.¹⁴**

¹² *Isaiah 25:7-8, 65:17-25; Hebrews 8:8-12; Ephesians 2:13-14, 11-22*, ¹³ *Ephesians 3:4-7; Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 10:12-13; I Corinthians 12:26; John 13:35; Revelation 7:9-10*, ¹⁴ *John 4:1-26*

The Church Across All Nations into Eternity

God is so magnificent that He makes His saving love available to all: all humans across all time and all nations are invited to participate in His worship.¹⁵ After the Fall, God promised Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed from his descendant.¹⁶ From that promise, the Old Testament is filled with the longing for a time when the entire world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, living as one community.¹⁷ In preparation for that glorious community, **Christ's redemptive work abolishes all social and racial merit in the Church universal¹⁸ and triumphant.¹⁹**

¹⁵ *Genesis 18:18; Psalm 67:1-3; Isaiah 2:1-4; Jeremiah 3:17, 31:31-34; Daniel 7:13-14; Hebrews 8:6-13; I John 2:2; Ephesians 2:14*, ¹⁶ *Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-27*, ¹⁷ *Isaiah 2:1-22, 11:9, 19:25, 56:6-8; Jeremiah 31:31-40; Habakkuk 2:14; Ephesians 1:10*, ¹⁸ *Galatians 3:26-28; Philemon 16; Colossians 3:11; I Timothy 2:4*, ¹⁹ *Revelation 7:9*

In Light of the Teaching of Scripture, We Affirm:

Scriptural Authority. The infallible and inerrant Word of God remains our sole authority, and we are to search the Scripture to discern the Lord's mind in all areas of faith and obedience. **This Biblical authority includes matters of race and justice in our current cultural moment and it stands over and above sociologically derived causes and cures.**

II Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12; II Peter 1:20-21

Creation. The Triune God is the Creator of all things and that man, male and female, is the pinnacle of His creation, made to bear His image. **As image-bearers of God, we are all precious in His sight, endowed with value, dignity, and honor in His likeness.** We witness the handiwork of our Creator in creation's diversity-- a display of His glory. The glorious image of our Creator can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members. Just as traces of God's glory are spread over many, many works, in both space and time, so also, the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in the fullness of humanity.

Genesis 1:26-27; Psalm 8; Colossians 3:10

Fall. The voluntary sin of Adam resulted in all of humanity's total depravity. **We believe that all people are sinners and we are not able to please God on our own merit or save ourselves.**

Genesis 3; Romans 3:9-12; Romans 8:7-8; I Corinthians 15:22

Personal Sin. In the Fall, all of humanity is given to fleshly pride, self-interest, and evil disregard for people created in the image of the Triune God. **We believe that racism and unjust treatment of any ethnic group is a sin that is rooted in these inequities as it comes from an undue sense of superiority in our hearts.** We call those who practice racism

and injustice to repentance, forgiveness, and transformation through Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2:3-4; James 2:4, 9; Proverbs 8:13; I John 1:9

Human Depravity. The Fall introduced distortions into the entire scope of human relationships and resulted in an inclination toward a worldly love of self and power. Like all sin, racism may deceptively manifest itself in systemic ways that are not easily recognizable to us, and so we rely on the Holy Spirit to identify anything in our own lives, congregation, and all society that fails to dignify people of different races. **We reject the ideology of racial supremacy in all of its manifestations, including white supremacy, as an evil that is antithetical to the Gospel.**

Genesis 9:6; Psalm 19:12-13, 139:23-24; Jeremiah 17:9; John 16:8; Galatians 2:11-14

Repentance. The Lord gives His people grace daily to turn from sin and self to follow Jesus Christ. At times, the Church has fallen short of the glory of God in actions and inactions with respect in injustice toward different racial and ethnic groups. **We believe that the Gospel calls us to repentance for our own racism, prejudices, and hatreds, both witting and unwitting.** Therefore, we seek to acknowledge our sins and humbly repent, to seek forgiveness, and to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Matthew 5:23-24, 6:12-13; 25:40, 45; James 5:16; Luke 19:8; Acts 6:1-7

Reconciliation. As Christ's Church, we are called to the ministry of reconciliation. This ministry has power for racial reconciliation. **We believe that the Church serves as God's agent of peacemaking and justice, acknowledging that nothing can divide brothers and sisters of different races in Christ.** Central to the Gospel is the Cross of Jesus Christ, whereby the dividing wall of hostility between people of different ancestries, nations, and cultures has been destroyed. For the Christian, all human identities must be subordinate to identity in Christ. Confronting racism and inequity that threatens Christian unity is a necessary aspect of racial reconciliation.

II Corinthians 5:18; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:14-16; John 17:20-21; James 2:15-16; Matthew 6:33; 25:31-40; Colossians 3:11

Lament & Prayer. We join our voices and hearts with those who suffer and lament the evils of racism. We cry out with the Psalmist "O LORD, how long?" and "weep with those who weep". **We ask God to bring peace, healing, and a reconciliation that feels out of reach as we survey our broken world.** We pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We pray, "Come, Lord Jesus".

Psalm 94:3; Jeremiah 12:1; Romans 12:15; Matthew 6:10; Revelation 22:20

Justice. Inequities in how the world treats people is a real and obvious consequence of the Fall and contrary to God's heart. We recognize that human institutions cannot fully be rid of actions that privilege some ethnic groups over others. **Yet, the** WEPC Pastoral Letter: The Gospel, Race, and Biblical Justice

Church will be a light in these places, listening to those who may be different from us, endeavoring to see those suffering injustice made whole, and ready to be used by the Lord to challenge partiality, beliefs, and practices that dishonor the God-given dignity of all people. God is just and His justice is assured. We know that our pursuits of justice would be among the works He planned in advance for us to do. The Gospel frees us from the conventions of this world in combatting injustice, including racism. Self-righteousness activism, critical race theory, wokeness, white-shaming, virtue signaling, social gospel, and similar man-centered strategies may have the appearance of holiness, but are of no value in accomplishing God's justice. Indeed, some of these preach another gospel. We no longer conform to the patterns of this world in the repudiation of racism. Instead, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Genesis 4:8-9; Matthew 5:13-16; James 2:1-13; Ephesians 2:10; Micah 6:8; Romans 12:2; Colossians 2:23; II Corinthians 4:7; Galatians 1:8

Advocacy. Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the Fall. We acknowledge that any violent means is counter-productive and contrary to Christ's teachings. Peaceful protest and calls for change are legitimate and sometimes necessary means to bring attention to racial injustice and inequities, just as with the rights of the unborn, the fatherless, and the poor. **As Biblical justice includes dimensions of both piety and intervention, the Church is to pray and actively advocate for all the oppressed and vulnerable.**

Exodus 5:15-16; Acts 16:35-40; Luke 22:49-51; Proverbs 21:13, 31:8-9; James 1:20-21; Romans 15:1-3, 7-9

Church. We believe in the primacy of the Church. **We believe that the Church is God's Family, a beautiful, multi-ethnic, new community. Christ's Church is a means of grace where the Holy Spirit uses faithful hospitality, community, worship, and discipleship to confront injustice, racism, and other cultural and societal manifestations of sin.** Our Heavenly Father draws into it people of every nation and tribe, bound together by the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the peace of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and His people are being conformed to His likeness, individually and corporately.

Genesis 12:1-3; Acts 2; Acts 10; Mark 11:17; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:14-16; I Corinthians 12:12-27; II Corinthians 3:18, 4:4; Colossians 1:15, 3:10; Hebrews 1:3; Romans 8:29

Consummation. The Church points the world to the hope of the coming **Kingdom of God, where all redeemed by Jesus Christ from all races and nations will praise the Lamb together with one voice, forever.** All sin, including racism, injustice, will ultimately be removed from human hearts and all the new creation at the coming of Christ to manifest His eternal reign.

Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9-10; Isaiah 11:6-10; 25:6-9

Conclusion: Let the Gospel Be Our Guide

WEPC aspires to be a church for all people relying on the power of the Gospel that brings personal conversion, community, Biblical justice, and cultural renewal. The Lord's ministry of reconciliation (*II Corinthians 5:16-21*) leads us to look to our resurrected Savior in faith. The current cultural moment grants us an opportunity to demonstrate to the watching world that the Gospel, as opposed to man-centered retributive tactics, is the remedy for all sin. The church can take a fearless look at our blind spots, publically repent where we see we have sinned, and labor toward healing, restitution, and reconciliation. We are called to be the beautiful, reconciled people of God.

It is the goal of the Elders at West End Presbyterian Church to address matters of race and Biblical justice by listening, repentance, and reform, and we encourage all church members and friends to join us. We want to hear from brothers and sisters in our church family where wounds need the healing of repentance. We also look forward to the testimonies of God's goodness when "brothers dwell in unity" (*Psalms 133:1*). We prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's renewal to faithfully fulfill our calling as God's church, deeply transformed by the Gospel.

As we learn how to bring the Gospel to bear on every facet of life and culture, we know that just having knowledge is not enough. We must trust and live the Word of God. We need to move forward with acts of righteousness for the sake of Christ's glory. To extend His Kingdom, we must pursue relationships with others who are also eager to bring about change. In accordance with Scriptures, our church body and leadership commit to recognize, equip, disciple, and empower all members from all backgrounds. We commit to welcome and celebrate all ethnicities. As a church, we want relationships between all brothers and sisters in Christ to be deep and full of the reality of our union in Christ. With this desire in our hearts, we urge you to become familiar with the discipleship resources listed at wepc.org/gospel-and-race.

Pursuing justice and reconciliation requires solidarity with one another in the body of Christ as we remain truthful, loving, and non-violent. God is indignant at evil and injustice but commands us "*in your anger, do not sin*" (*Ephesians 4:26*).

Finally, we realize that merely writing a pastoral letter is insufficient. We need to be willing to act, within the spheres where God has given us influence, in all areas of Biblical justice, including those specific to men and women of color. Therefore, we endeavor to prayerfully and honestly assess our programs and practices so that they are not conformed to the world. We will also work diligently to ensure that they are Christ-like and that "there is no distinction" in that our programs

and practices reflect "the same Lord is the Lord of all" (*Romans 10:12*). We will seek to implement "Specific Suggestions for Congregations" articulated by the Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Racial Reconciliation to the 46th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. Above all, we will not be silent but will speak out with "a word fitly spoken" (*Proverbs 25:11*) when the bitter fruit of racial injustice rears its head in the systems, structures, churches, and individuals in our country.

We eagerly look forward to the day when Jesus Christ returns with righteousness and justice to vindicate his people and to right all the wrongs in this world. All sin and suffering, including tears, sorrows, injustices, racism, hatred, and violence will be transformed into a symphony of joy, peace, and blessing. A multi-ethnic congregation from every tribe, language, people, and nation will be redeemed in harmony with one another under the worship and reign of God.

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (*Revelation 7:9-10*)

Glossary of Terms

Race. In sociological contexts, race is a constructed term to discuss ethnic/cultural differences between people groups. Biblically, it refers to a group of peoples, tribes, and nations.

Genesis 10; Mark 7:26; Philippians 3:5; Revelation 5:9

Racism. "Racism is an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races. Racism includes the social exclusion or judgment, or the segregating, of an individual or group of individuals based on racial differences, which always include physical appearance and its underlying genetic structure that are hereditary and unalterable" (*PCA Ad Interim Committee on Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation, 2018*). The sin of partiality is the root with prejudice/discrimination towards another on the basis of race/ethnicity being the manifestation.

Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Acts 10:34-48; James 2:1, 9

Racial Supremacy. Belief that certain races or ethnicities are superior/inferior to others.

White Supremacy. Belief that the white race is superior to others.

John 4:9; Luke 10:25-37

Racial Injustice. The absence of justice, or a violation of rights, on the basis of race.

Deuteronomy 19:14, 24:6-7; Isaiah 59:14-15; Proverbs 3:28-30; Hosea 12:7

Oppression. The wrongful use of power to bring about prolonged unjust treatment or control.

Exodus 1:5, 5:8; Ecclesiastes 4:1; Ezekiel 22:29; James 2:6, 5:4

Justice. The act of justice is both retributive and restorative. Retribution is justice served to those who are punished for their wrongdoing. Restoration is justice when those who have unrightfully been hurt or wronged are given back what was taken from them. "Taken this way, the combination of righteousness and justice that God dictates means a selfless way of life in which people do everything they can to ensure that others are treated well and injustices are fixed." (*The Bible Project: Justice*)

Micah 6:10-12; Isaiah 1:17; Westminster Confession 26.1, 24:3; Westminster Larger Catechism 97, 131, 135, 141, 145, 147

Inequity. A lack of fair or balanced justice in judgment/ruling over individuals, peoples, or nations in both public (government) and private (employers, organizations, etc.).

Proverbs 11:1; Habakkuk 1:4

Structural/Systemic. Structures refer to the way we build or organize something. Systemic means something that is common to a system, not to a particular part. Sin has pervaded all of creation. The effect of any sin in a structure/system can be ill motive or unjust ends to the structures and traditions of all societies across all of time. It is helpful to define specifically the issue instead of categorizing in general broad definitions.

Romans 8:19-22; Genesis 6:5-6

The WEPC Session is indebted to the following sources in preparation of this pastoral letter:

- The Gospel, Race & Biblical Justice Committee of Session: Brian Bassett, Kevin Greene, Paul Howe, Roger Johnson, Tim Sinclair and Gary Witthoefft; with contributions from Richard Campbell; advice and support from Changjwok & Matbien Deng, Christine Marobe, Ron and Sonia Walters, and Wesley Wilcox.
- [The Westminster Standards](#)
- PCA [Statement on Racial Reconciliation](#) (2002)
- Committee on Mission to North America, [Pastoral Letter on Racism](#) (2004)
- PCA General Assembly [Overture 43](#) confessing & condemning sins of racism and resolving to pursue racial reconciliation (2016)

- Report of the PCA Ad Interim Committee on [Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation](#) (2018)
- Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*
- Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at its Best*
- Dhati Lewis, *Advocates: The Narrow Path to Racial Reconciliation*
- Tim Keller, [Justice and Race articles](#), Gospel in Life (2020)
- [WEPC Theological Vision Document](#) (2014)
- Covenant Seminary, [Statement on Biblical Social Justice](#) (2017)
- [Redeemer East Side Pastoral Letter](#)
- [PCA Coordinators & Presidents Statement on Heinous Killings](#)
- [Park Cities PCA \(Dallas\) Statement on Race, Love, & Justice](#)
- [Trinity Park Church \(NC\) Standing in Hope of the Gospel](#)
- [The Bible Project: Justice](#)