

Covenant Seminary Statement on Biblical Social Justice

by President Mark Dalbey and the Faculty of Covenant Seminary

NOTE: This statement seeks to answer questions and concerns we have received regarding the seminary's view on matters of social justice and particularly as it relates to matters of racial reconciliation and racial justice.

The purpose of Covenant Seminary is “to glorify the triune God by training his servants to walk in God’s grace, minister God’s Word, and equip God’s people—all for God’s mission.” Our focused calling is to prepare pastors and leaders for God’s church and Kingdom—leaders who will accept God’s invitation to join him in his redemptive mission of reaching nations and generations as he reconciles and restores all things in heaven and earth through his beloved son Jesus Christ, who is “making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). Our commitment to the Bible, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission means our students and graduates will embrace an uncompromising commitment to the comprehensive truth of God’s inerrant Word. Students engage in deep biblical, theological, and historical study and reflection in order to understand and learn how to engage the people and issues of our day, as well as future issues they will face. They learn ultimate allegiance to God and “gospel correctness” regardless of where that lands on the spectrum of today’s “political correctness.” Their motivation and manner in all of this will reflect deep love for God and neighbor.

The one true gospel of Jesus Christ is about “proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God” everywhere, all the time, to everybody (Luke 8:1). It is comprehensive as it addresses both personal salvation and the whole of life. A biblical example of this is Zacchaeus’s personal and social response in Luke 19:7–10. In recent conversations regarding the one true gospel and a false social gospel, I have returned to a book by Harvie Conn called *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). In chapter three on “Evangelism and Justice: Setting Things Right,” Conn makes the case that while the Christian life and witness begins with proclamation, fellowship, worship, and service, it must also include righteous deeds and justice. While our righteousness biblically originates solely from the “imputed forensic righteousness” found in Jesus’s finished work on the cross, it also demonstrates itself in “the kingly justice that God has promised for the salvation of the oppressed and the outcasts” (Conn, 43). For example, in the context of severe social injustice in Israelite society

(Micah 6:10–12), the Israelites are told, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). This is a call for his people to fight for, love, and embody justice in all aspects of society as a sign of their reverential fear and love of their just and holy God and love for their neighbors. While some branches of liberal theology have erred gravely by equating issues of social justice with the gospel and downplaying or eliminating the call to repentance and personal faith in Jesus, we must ensure not to make the opposite mistake of removing the biblical call for social righteousness and justice from our understanding of the gospel.

What situations do our neighbors find themselves in as they hear this proclamation that require tangible acts of Christ’s love that flow out of that gospel? Today, we face a wide range of issues that are matters of neighbor love expressed in biblical social justice. These include but are not limited to abortion, human trafficking, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, abuse of women and children, misuse of power, criminal justice, and lack of educational and economic opportunity for the marginalized in our society. The Bible starts with creation and ends with new creation, and the impact of the fall affects everything, including the creation itself and the structures of society. The gospel of God’s saving and restoring grace is set into this framework. Love for God and love for neighbor are always to be held together by the people of God.

Covenant Seminary is the denominational seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), with our main campus located in St. Louis, Missouri. As the denominational seminary, we exist to serve the denomination and its churches as we prepare leaders to engage the pressing issues of our time. A key current issue in the PCA is racial reconciliation and justice as reflected in the overture overwhelmingly passed by its General Assembly in June 2016 that includes the following:

Therefore be it resolved, that the 44th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America does recognize, confess, condemn, and repent of corporate and historical sins, including those committed during the Civil Rights era, and continuing racial sins of ourselves and our fathers such as the segregation of worshipers by race; the exclusion of persons from Church membership on the basis of race; the exclusion of churches, or elders, from membership in the Presbyteries on the basis of race; the teaching that the Bible sanctions racial segregation and discourages inter-racial marriage; the participation in and defense of white supremacist

organizations; and the failure to live out the gospel imperative that “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Rom. 13:10); and

Be it further resolved, that this General Assembly does recognize, confess, condemn, and repent of past failures to love brothers and sisters from minority cultures in accordance with what the gospel requires, as well as failures to lovingly confront our brothers and sisters concerning racial sins and personal bigotry, and failing to “learn to do good, seek justice and correct oppression” (Isa. 1:17);

Three years ago, the shooting of an unarmed black man by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (about ten miles from our campus), surfaced underlying and previously unacknowledged deep racial pain, tension, and lack of advocacy in our region. As we at the Seminary reflected on these events, our eyes and ears were opened to things we needed to see by carefully listening to several of our PCA African American alumni pastoring in St. Louis. As a result of these and other conversations and reflections, our board passed a unanimous motion stating the following in connection to a Missouri Presbytery overture that eventually was answered by the one stated above:

We believe this overture provides a helpful and important next step to grow as a seminary community in our commitment to racial reconciliation and justice:

- *in our understanding of where we have failed to love and serve our African American brothers and sisters and neighbors in the past and present;*
- *in our listening to and providing voice for a deeper owning of the ways we have sinned and are sinning against our brothers and sisters by way of commission and omission;*
- *in our commitment to seeing the Seminary become a more diverse community in its faculty, staff, board, and student body; and*
- *in our need to have a more comprehensive training and equipping of all our students to understand and embrace doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God in relationship to our brothers and sisters.*

Issues of racial reconciliation and justice are subsets of larger issues that marginalize all kinds of people in our failure to love God and love neighbor. Prejudices and ethnocentrism fuel racism and many other forms of

mistreatment of people across various ethnic differences and socioeconomic strata. However, application to the issue of racial sin against African Americans is of particular relevance in St. Louis, the PCA, and the United States of America in our long and sad history. It is right to name it, repent of it, grieve it, and steward present and future opportunities to make things right going forward.

A “Black Lives Matter” movement has emerged in the past few years that calls for response and perspective. We agree that black lives do matter and it is critical to emphasize this against the backdrop of our nation’s history, as well as our Presbyterian and evangelical history. In this history and still today, the white church has not only acted as though black lives do not matter and are inherently inferior compared to white lives, but has even attempted at times to justify this view from Scripture. However, we see the need to distance ourselves from some of the tactics, philosophies, and ethics influencing this decentralized organization that takes various expressions at the grassroots level in different locations. While non-violent public protests are an appropriate means to address social injustices, hate and violence against fellow image-bearers of God are not. All lives matter even in times when it is necessary to highlight certain groups of people who have not been treated as though they matter. Love for God and love for all neighbors must be the mark of those who follow Jesus.

As the denominational seminary, we are seeking to work in conjunction with the current PCA study committee for racial reconciliation to “*develop specific steps that could be taken to effect racial reconciliation and the advance of the gospel.*” We are striving to be a place that facilitates conversations and helps future pastors and ministry leaders train for the real issues of life by providing varying voices in a community of learners where we listen and seek to hear one another. Our desire is to train our students to equip those they will teach and disciple to live out this call to double love for God and neighbor. As Reformed people, we recognize that social problems are complicated. They have numerous components: personal sins, small-and large-scale exploitation, structural inequities, and circumstances of birth. No one can fix everything. But we can provide the theological tools for working things through—for making practical judgments about what is most pressing, what can be fixed, and how our faithfulness to the redeeming, resurrected Jesus drives us. This is our commitment as we train gospel leaders for the challenges facing the church today.

In the new heavens and new earth, people of all races—of every tribe, tongue and nation (Rev 7:9)—will have an equal seat at God’s table, where love for God and neighbor will be pure and unhindered by sin. We long to see this future vision become an ever-increasing current reality in the PCA and beyond. We desire to see God’s will be done and his Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. This prayer our Lord taught us leads us to an expansive view of the triune God, the gospel, his people, his Kingdom, and his mission. May God help us!