

SEEK FIRST

How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything

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 ZONDERVAN®

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PURSUE JUSTICE

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Martin Luther King Jr.

The rap artist Kendrick Lamar is known for his musical creativity and lyrical genius. Anyone familiar with Lamar's music, however, also knows that it is deeply thoughtful, prophetic, and spiritual. In an interview, Lamar shared about the roots of his faith and his experience in church. He recounted going to church services and hearing feel-good messages with a focus on praise, hope, and a promise of a blessing just around the corner. All of this, said Lamar, "had an emptiness about it" and felt "one sided." Looking back, Lamar reflected on why:

I've finally figured out why I left those services feeling spiritually unsatisfied as a child. I discovered more truth. But simple truth. Our God is a loving God. Yes. He's a merciful God. Yes. But he's even more so a God of DISCIPLINE. OBE-DIENCE. A JEALOUS God. . . . I feel it's my calling to share the joy of God, but with exclamation, more so, the FEAR OF GOD. The balance. Knowing the power in what he can build, and also what he can destroy.¹

Lamar tapped into something that resonates with our culture today. We no longer accept the Santa Claus God who shows up from time to time with gifts but doesn't address the real stuff of life. The injustice of the world is too much to ignore, especially when it is constantly in front of our faces through the twenty-four-hour news cycle and always in our pockets through our phones. In a world marred with pain, Lamar is right to lament forms of Christianity that seek positive and encouraging vibes while ignoring the suffering around us.

We want a God who cares when the weak are oppressed and is willing to do something about it. And that's exactly what we find when we open the Scriptures. The God of the Bible is no sentimental deity, dispensing religious fairy dust to keep us in a good mood. The Lord is a king whose righteous character compels him to defend that which he loves.

Much of what Lamar craves is captured in the biblical concept of justice. We all long for justice. But with so much injustice in the world, it feels overwhelming:

sex trafficking
 slavery
 poverty
 racism
 educational inequality
 sexism
 domestic abuse
 abortion
 police brutality
 mass incarceration
 and on and on . . .

How can we possibly respond to all these injustices? What can *I* do? When it comes to justice, nobody can be an expert on

every issue, but the Bible does provide wisdom to face any issue with the character and resolve that are necessary. The kingdom of God gives us the framework for pursuing justice in a world of injustice.

A KINGDOM OF JUSTICE

Justice is at the heart of the biblical vision for the kingdom. Why? Because God is a just king. Psalm 9:7 says, “The LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice.” There is much to learn, however, in order to understand and experience the justice of God’s kingdom.

Justice Is God’s Agenda before It’s Ours

In the face of pervasive injustice, many people today have had an awakening to the need for justice in the world. And this newfound perspective often leads to ambitious ideas: *Let’s begin a movement! Let’s start a nonprofit!* We may feel as if *we* came up with a new idea. But God has been passionate about justice since long before you or I felt a need to get involved. Justice is God’s agenda, and we get to be a part of the work that he’s doing in restoring the beautiful order of his creation.²

God’s heart for justice is put on display in Psalm 146, which tells how the Lord “executes justice for the oppressed” (v. 7). It goes on to say:

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations. (Ps. 146:8–10)

God's reign is good news for the marginalized. In fact, throughout the Old Testament, we see God's heart for the poor, the fatherless, immigrants, and widows (Zech. 7:10). These were the most vulnerable people in society and were often taken advantage of or forgotten. But God has not forgotten them. He is the "father of the fatherless" (Ps. 68:5), the husband to the widow (Isa. 54:5), the provider for the poor (Ps. 140:12), and the refuge for the immigrant (Ps. 146:9).

This is not merely an Old Testament idea, as if God shifted his attention in the New Testament to purely spiritual matters. God is unchanging, and his concern for the downtrodden is revealed even more in the coming of Christ. In fact, Jesus was born *fatherless* (Matt. 1:18–25) into a *poor* family (Luke 2:24; 2 Cor. 8:9), he immediately became an *immigrant* (Matt. 2:13), and eventually was most likely the son of a *widow* (Mark 3:31–35). In the Old Testament, God identified with the marginalized; in the New Testament, he became one of them.

Called to Be a People of Justice

Justice is God's agenda. But *how* does God execute justice? God usually brings about justice through his justified people. The Lord is the one who watches over the sojourners, but he also commands his people to care for the sojourners (Deut. 10:18–19). The Lord upholds the widow and fatherless, and he does so through a people who care for the widow and fatherless (James 1:27). God is the advocate for the poor, and he calls his people to speak up on their behalf (Prov. 31:9). God reigns through his people.

The call to be a people of justice is proclaimed beautifully by the prophet Micah. He asks the people of God, "What does the LORD require of you . . . ?" The answer is clear:

To do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

Justice is not merely a suggestion or a good idea; it is a requirement from God. And this is God's word for *all* of God's people. The call to justice is not an optional add-on for a few socially minded, passionate Christians. If God is passionate about something, then indifference is not an option for us. God cares about justice, and inasmuch as he's the God of justice, we are called to be a people of justice.

The kingdom call to justice was a clear part of Christ's ministry. Jesus proclaimed "the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23) and then immediately taught his disciples the ethics of the kingdom (Matt. 5–7). The most well-known sermon of all time, typically known as the Sermon on the Mount, is a vision of how God's people live under God's reign. In the kingdom of God, people love their enemies rather than hate them, always keep their word, and are generous to the poor. In the kingdom, God's mercy and justice are shown through a people who reflect the heart of their king. The call to justice is not simply about championing an issue, but rather embodying a kingdom.

What Is Justice?

Since the Lord is a God of justice and his people are called to be a community of justice, we need to make sure we understand what justice means. While Western society thinks of justice predominantly in legal terms, the Hebrew understanding of justice was a vision of beautiful order for all of life. For the Jewish people, justice was not merely legal, it was personal, relational, social, global, and even cosmic. The biblical understanding of justice can be understood through two key concepts: equity and order.

The Hebrew word for justice—*mishpat*—refers to treating people equitably, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or

ability to contribute to society. *Mishpat* is giving someone what they deserve, whether punishment or protection. That it is done equitably is at the heart of justice. If two people deserve the same wage, but one gets less because of their gender, this is a violation of *mishpat*. If two people deserve punishment, but one is excused because they are a part of a wealthy family, this is a violation of *mishpat*.

Proverbs 11:1 provides a tangible image of God's heart for equity: "A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is his delight." In ancient times people would buy and sell using a scale. For example, a seller might have a ten-pound stone that would be used to measure ten pounds of wheat. But if the seller was dishonest and greedy, he might shave some weight off the stone to sell less wheat for the same price. God abhors such violation of equity. He is a God of justice.

Justice entails equity but also order. The biblical vision of justice is not merely about maintaining order in the legal system but in the way the world works. Harvard professor Elaine Scarry observes that while beauty and justice might seem to be opposite concepts, they are actually not that different.³ If one tries to define each, they will end up using similar words like *order*, *symmetry*, and *clarity*. That's why the English word *fair* can mean either "just" or "beautiful." One could say "that trial was fair" or "that dress was the fairest of all." God cares about justice because it's the beautiful order meant for the world that he created out of love.

Justice is a beautiful vision of equity and order in the world. *Equity* could be defined as all people getting what they deserve, whether protection or punishment. *Order* could be defined as a vision of the rightful harmony and flourishing of the world. These definitions provide us with a positive vision of justice, one which is not simply about punishing wrongdoing but also promoting that which contributes to harmony and flourishing. Living a just life entails more than avoiding breaking the law. It means seeking the very things the law is there to protect. Murder

is an injustice, but justice also calls for acknowledging the dignity of all human life. Stealing is an injustice, but justice calls for generosity to those in need. Slavery is an injustice, but justice calls for pursuing and protecting freedom for all.⁴

Understanding justice in this way begins to paint a picture of what it might look like to “do justice.” Even more helpful, though, is a real-life example of someone who has done this well. Martin Luther King Jr., compelled by his Christian faith and the biblical idea that all people are made in the image of God, embodied the biblical call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. In Dr. King’s book *Why We Can’t Wait*, he spoke of the urgent need for justice and the way in which God’s people ought to pursue it. Dr. King required every person who marched with him to sign the following pledge.



Martin Luther King’s Pledge

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.⁵

Dr. King knew that Jesus is the only perfect embodiment of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. So he taught his followers to look to Christ as the model and means of pursuing justice today.

THE UNIQUE ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM

The idea of justice is very appealing to our culture today. It is popular to march for equality and fight against oppression. But there isn't merely one idea of justice out there, as if we all agree on what justice is and simply need to achieve it. No. We all long for justice, but whose version of justice?⁶ While for many years most Americans agreed on the basic principles of right and wrong (broadly agreeing with Christian principles), today there's a new morality. According to this new ethic, tolerance is the highest virtue, and denying yourself is the unforgivable sin. This new morality isn't merely a slight adjustment to Christian ethics; it is a different framework altogether.

My wife and I recently had a couple over to our house for dinner, and the contrast of different views of justice was on full display. This couple had rejected the traditional upbringing of their conservative families and discovered the freedom of a new life. They live together but are not married, spend much of their time rescuing and adopting troubled dogs, are passionate advocates for the LGBT community, enjoy smoking marijuana, and consider themselves spiritual people, having shrines in their apartment and praying regularly to crystals. As we spent the evening getting to know one another, I was struck about halfway through the night with a realization: they think we're bad people.

I had assumed—like most past generations had in our country—that churchgoing folk like us who are married with children are viewed as moral people. But as we sat in our dining room, I could read between the lines: they saw themselves

possessing the moral high ground and viewed us as immoral, narrow-minded people, whose traditional beliefs were offensive to what they believed is right and wrong. Two different understandings of justice were on the table.

It's time for Christians to own up to the fact that we have a unique ethic shaped by life under God's reign. We all want human flourishing, but we have different understandings of what that means and how to achieve it. One of the most important ways that Christians can help define and contribute to the common good is by teaching the foundational idea that all people are made in the image of God and therefore deserving of dignity and value.

HUMAN DIGNITY FROM THE WOMB TO THE TOMB

What does it look like to be a people of justice in a world of injustice? Justice entails giving people their due, whether punishment or protection. What is their due? What do all people deserve? Christians believe that all people are made in the image of God and therefore are worthy of dignity, value, and respect.

Where Dignity Comes From

When it comes to dignity, the key question is: *Why* do all people have dignity and deserve certain rights? The equality of all people might sound like an obvious, self-evident truth, but it's not. Many cultures do not believe in the equality of all people. Throughout history, and still today, many cultures determine dignity based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, the family one is born into, or how much a person contributes to society. In many Eastern cultures that believe in karma and reincarnation, if someone is born into a lower caste, it is assumed that they must deserve it because they did something bad in a former life.

Science cannot prove that all people are created equal. History does not attest to the idea that all people are created equal (Aristotle, for example, believed some were born to be slaves⁷).

Why, then, do Christians believe that all people have dignity and deserve certain rights? “In the image of God he created him, male and female he created him” (Gen. 1:27). Dignity is not something that has to be earned or achieved; it is bestowed by God as a fact of every human being. As John Perkins says, “You don’t give people dignity . . . you affirm it.”⁸

The dignity and equality of all people are uniquely biblical ideas.⁹ If it feels self-evident to you that all people are created equal, that’s probably because you live in a society shaped by the biblical view that all people are made in God’s image.

Dignity for All

Scripture calls us to recognize the dignity and value of *all* human life. That’s why God’s heart is for the unborn (Ps. 139:13–16), those with special needs (Luke 14:12–14), immigrants (Deut. 10:17–19), orphans (Ps. 10:14), our enemies (Matt. 5:44), and the elderly (1 Tim. 5:4). In other words, we’re not allowed to pick and choose whose dignity we defend. Seeking justice only for people who look like you is the greatest injustice. God gives a vision of seeking justice for all, from the womb to the tomb.

Sadly, many people today divide over whose dignity to defend. Some fight for the dignity of the unborn but don’t recognize the image of God in the immigrant (and vice versa). Christians are people who see the image of God in the unborn, the mentally or physically disabled, the immigrant, the widow, the poor, the prisoner, and the elderly. Not only do we acknowledge the different facets of human brokenness, but we take notice of their connectedness. For example, half of children who age out of the foster care system become homeless. And within forty-eight hours of becoming homeless, most will be approached by a

trafficker. Ninety percent will at some point become incarcerated. So if you want to address homelessness, trafficking, and mass incarceration, you have to give attention to the foster care system. All brokenness is connected.¹⁰

Driven by Dignity More Than Needs

Acknowledging the dignity of all people reshapes the way we think of justice and mercy. We are driven not primarily by peoples' needs but by their dignity. In other words, when I see someone sleeping on the street, I see them as an image bearer of God more than as a "homeless person." When a teenage girl gets pregnant, I do not see her and her child as problems to be dealt with, but as people to be loved. Even when someone is being cruel to me, I am called to see the image of God in them before I focus on their wrongful actions. A dignity-driven approach enables us to acknowledge people's needs without defining them by their needs.¹¹

For example, when I see Steve, the man who sleeps on the sidewalk at the end of my block, I'm compelled to help him because of his dignity more than his needs. He deserves to be treated with respect, which can be shown by acknowledging his presence, looking him in the eye, and learning his story over time. The dignity of all human life reminds us that we're never merely talking about "issues"; we're talking about people, image bearers of God who are worthy of respect.

The Messiah's Mission of Justice

Most people know that Jesus came to bring love and mercy, but few recognize that he also came to bring justice. In the book of Isaiah, the Lord expresses the Messiah's mission in this way: "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1). The hope of Israel was that a messiah would come and restore the beautiful order of God's creation.

When Jesus began his ministry, he made clear that he was this Messiah who would establish justice.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
 and recovering of sight to the blind,
 to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Jesus embodied justice throughout his life. And yet Jesus would ultimately display justice in the most shocking way. He brought about justice not by punishing the wicked but by taking their place. On the cross he who was righteous and just died in the place of the wicked and cruel. The judge took the place of the judged. The just died for the unjust. Why? To make us righteous. To make us just. In God's wisdom he made a way to justify his people *and* show forth the glory of his own justice (Rom. 3:21–26).

THE GOSPEL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Sadly, among Christians today there is a divide between those who champion the gospel and those who fight for justice. Some Christians are passionate about social issues such as racism, mass incarceration, and poverty, but their emphasis on social action leads to an eclipse of the gospel. Others are so focused on the good news of grace that they ignore the clear call of Scripture toward justice.¹²

How should we respond to this dichotomy between the gospel and social justice? At the most basic level, we have to resist pendulum-swinging reductionism and uphold proclaiming the gospel and seeking justice because both are clearly biblical

mandates. Upholding these truths, however, does not require a balancing act, but a proper relationship. In short, the gospel creates a people who seek mercy and justice. Why? Because the gospel gives us eyes to see others the way God does, and gives new hearts that motivate us to be involved in the work of justice that God is doing. The gospel gets to the heart, drawing us to God and into God's mission. The more we understand the gospel, the more we are drawn into Christ's heart for the oppressed and hurting.

The interconnectedness of the gospel and justice, although often missed today, has been upheld throughout the history of the church. Building on teachings of the Reformers and the Puritans, Tim Keller writes:

If a person has grasped the meaning of God's grace in his heart, he will do justice. If he doesn't live justly, then he may say with his lips that he is grateful for God's grace, but in his heart he is far from him. If he doesn't care about the poor, it reveals that at best he doesn't understand the grace he has experienced, and at worst he has not really encountered the saving mercy of God. Grace should make you just.¹³

Throughout Scripture, we see that a true encounter with the grace of God leads to a sacrificial heart for the marginalized and oppressed. Doing justice is not the reason you receive grace, but it most certainly will be a result of receiving grace. Faith produces works.

In other words, the good news that we are justified by grace becomes the motivation for seeking justice for the oppressed. Seeking justice doesn't replace the gospel, but it should flow from a heart that is transformed by the gospel. The proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied with the demonstration of mercy and justice.

SO WHAT DO I DO?

Feeling overwhelmed when talking about injustice is normal. Homelessness, sex trafficking, and racism are complex and do not have easy solutions. The weight of it all can lead to paralysis. But while you may not be able to do everything, you can do something. Here are four basic action steps for being a part of the solution.

Listen

There's a time to speak and a time to listen. Sadly, Christians are better known for the former than the latter. But to be a people of justice, we must learn to listen, especially to the victims of injustice. One of the most dignifying things you can do for a person is to listen to their story and acknowledge their experience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this the "ministry of listening."¹⁴ He said that when we listen to one another, we are God's ears to others. People feel known and heard by God when they are known and heard by his people.

God gave us two ears and one mouth, so our listening and speaking should be in proportion to that. If you want to be a part of holistic justice, start listening to the stories of injustice. Ask an immigrant about their experience in America. Ask a single mom what it's like in her position. Ask someone how their ethnicity informs their faith.

Learn

In our pursuit of justice, we will only advance as far as our empathy will take us. Sympathy is feeling compassion for someone who is hurting. Empathy is caring enough to enter into their pain. It means trying to understand what someone is going through from their perspective. That's why we have to be informed if we want to be involved in the work of justice.

Read books. Watch documentaries. Ask questions. Never stop learning.

There is a lot of uninformed passion in our culture today. Social media allows anyone to publish their opinions to the world, even if those ideas are undeveloped, unfiltered, and unhelpful. It's easy to get caught up in a cultural wave of moral outrage and finger-pointing when we don't really know what we're talking about and have not examined our own hearts. But to truly seek justice, we must commit to learning the complexity of issues and understanding the problem before we try to provide a solution.

Speak

After we have listened and learned, we need to speak up. Proverbs 31:8–9 says, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” We are called to be a voice for the voiceless, an advocate for the powerless, and to use our influence or platform to expose injustice and point people to grace and truth. Call out racism or sexism when you see it. Champion those who flourish in a way that leads to the flourishing of others.

When we speak up, it must not simply be to make it clear to others that we're right and they're wrong. Speaking truth is necessary, but one of the most powerful forms of truth telling is confession. On many social issues, before we bring our apologies (defending the faith), we may need to bring our apologies (where we haven't been consistent with our own faith). The church hasn't always been faithful to Scripture in addressing racism and sexism, in its use of power, and in matters of financial integrity. Before we can be a part of the solution, we have to own up to the ways in which we've been a part of the problem. We must acknowledge the sins of our fathers (Neh. 9:2) and take responsibility to bring change today.

Act

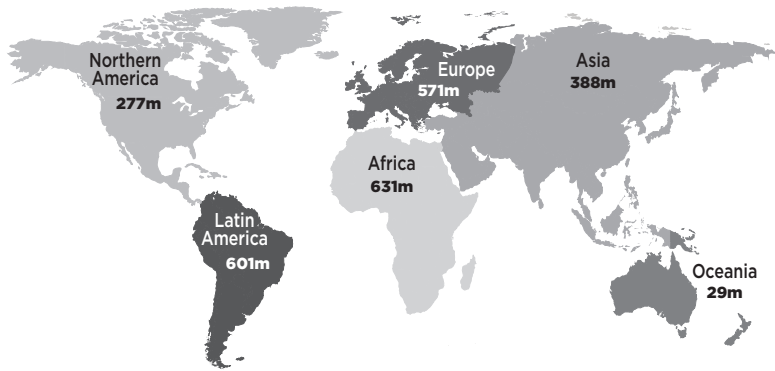
Proverbs 21:3 says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.” In other words, God doesn’t want your religious affection if it doesn’t overflow into a life of justice. We are called to act, and that can mean many different things (beyond listening, learning, and speaking, which are powerful actions themselves): build relationships with people who don’t look like you, raise awareness for overlooked-but-important issues, defend the weak, pray for the oppressed, create conversations, vote in accordance with your faith, and live in a way that shows that you are following the king who came to bring justice.

A CASE STUDY ON RACISM

It is beyond the scope of this book to apply a kingdom view of justice to every issue in our culture today. But it is helpful to see how this works on a concrete issue. Let’s look at the injustice of racism, a problem that is pervasive globally and has a long and heinous history in the United States and in the church.

To begin with, let’s acknowledge that Christianity was started by a Jewish peasant who didn’t speak English and never left the Middle East. And while Jesus didn’t have a global impact during his earthly life, he certainly had a global vision and sent his followers with a commission to make disciples of every ethnic group in the world. Over the last two thousand years, the gospel has done more to tear down cultural barriers and bring people together than any movement this world has ever seen. That’s why Richard Bauckham can boldly claim that “Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion.”¹⁵ Most religions are attached to the culture of their origin. For example, 98 percent of Hindus and Buddhists live in Asia-Pacific.¹⁶ The movement of Jesus, however, has truly become a worldwide, multicultural phenomenon.

Global Christianity¹⁷



And yet, despite God’s beautiful design of ethnicity and diversity, we live in a world where differences often lead to division. Racial inequity is rampant in our culture, and sadly, it’s not just a dilemma for the world, it’s also a problem in the church. So how can we apply the biblical vision of justice to the problem of racism? It’s going to take a holistic approach, one that includes sound doctrine, compassionate community, and wise action.

The Biblical Vision of a Multiethnic Kingdom

Ethnic diversity was God’s idea. Every human is made in the image of God, and the different cultures across the globe reflect the creativity of our Creator. As Scripture says, “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

However, in a fallen world ethnic diversity becomes an opportunity for sinful oppression. Racism is a rejection of God’s declaration that all of humanity reflects his nature. The seed of sinful hatred that was planted in the soil of human depravity has grown into a lynching tree. And while sin is first and foremost against God, our sin also leads to injustice in personal acts of racism (one person mistreating another person because of their race)

and in systemic racism (patterns and sometimes laws in a culture that give advantages to particular races). We must understand that while racism is ultimately a sin problem, it is also, and derivatively, a personal, social, and political problem.

But there's good news. Jesus's death on the cross not only reconciles us to God but also reconciles us to one another. Unity and integration are possible because Jesus has severed the root of racism (sin) and torn down the dividing wall of hostility through his sacrificial death on the cross (Eph. 2:14). As the African church father Athanasius once said, "It is only on the cross that a man dies with arms outstretched . . . that He might draw His ancient people with the one and the Gentiles with the other, and join both together in himself."¹⁸

The gospel is the ultimate answer to racism, but it is not the sole answer to racism. We need the whole counsel of God to address racism in its personal, social, and political dimensions. Everyone is made in the image of God and worthy of dignity, value, and respect—whether they believe the gospel or not. Thus the church has a twofold calling. First, the church, as a multiethnic people united in Christ, is called to model the reconciling power of the gospel to a world longing for genuine community. Second, the church, as disciples sent out by Jesus, is called to be peacemakers and ambassadors of reconciliation in a world that is racially divided.

For a disciple of Jesus, the struggle against racism is real and can feel exhausting, but it always comes within a framework of hope. The biblical vision of a multiethnic people united in Christ is a promise before it is a command. Revelation 5 offers a glimpse of our future, with a beautiful description of Christ and his kingdom:

You were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God.
(Rev. 5:9–10).

This is the vision of the eternal kingdom of God. As the church keeps its eyes fixed on Jesus, we have an opportunity to reflect the manifold beauty of God and the unifying power of his grace.

The Most Segregated Hour of the Week

The roots of racism go deep in the soil of American culture. The statistics and stories could stack as high as the Lincoln Memorial, and the ongoing slew of racially driven violence is sufficient evidence that Dr. King's dream has not yet been fulfilled. Recent events, however, have not created the problem but are exposing a problem that's been there all along. Though there has certainly been progress in America, we've also learned that changed laws don't automatically produce changed hearts.

The church is meant to be part of God's answer to racism in the world, but unfortunately it has often contributed to the problem instead. The old adage that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America sadly remains true. One study showed that while 86 percent of Protestant churches in the United States are made up of one predominant racial group, only 33 percent of American churchgoers believe that their church needs to do more in pursuing racial diversity.¹⁹ Jerusalem, we have a problem.

As we move forward, avoiding racism is not enough. The law can prevent segregation, but love calls us to integration and unity. "Separate but equal" is not an option when we believe Christ died to bring us together. The gospel makes us a family where the waters of baptism run thicker than the blood of family origin.

Whenever Christians have been silent in the face of racism, we have failed. When Christians have been complicit in racism, we have failed. When Christians refuse to acknowledge the present reality of racism, we fail. Many in the church want to make progress, but we cannot move forward until we first acknowledge the wrongs of the past and can be honest about the pain

of the present.²⁰ We need to listen and learn from one another, and we still have much to do.

Diverse Unity

Multicultural unity will require a deliberate pursuit shaped by wisdom, courage, sacrifice, empathy, and love. This is the responsibility of the whole church, not just a handful of passionate people, and certainly not just minorities. Racism is a sin, but so is indifference to racism. If God cares enough about bringing together every tribe and tongue that he sent his Son to the cross, then we are all called to participate in this reconciling work.

Sometimes the church has downplayed diversity for the sake of unity. People may say things like, “The color of your skin doesn’t matter.” But a “color blind” mentality simply shifts from taking advantage of someone’s differences to ignoring their uniqueness. Different cultural backgrounds should be delighted in, not downplayed. Cesar Chavez once said, “Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.”²¹ In other words, when you enter into a church community, you should not have to check your cultural background at the door. Yet in many churches today that’s exactly what many minorities feel the pressure to do. It is only when we embrace our diversity that we can truly be unified. To flatten our differences is to confuse unity with uniformity. Instead, we should rejoice in the richness that comes from our different backgrounds and ethnicities.

Reconciling Love

John Perkins was born to a family of sharecroppers in 1930 in Mississippi, and throughout his life he experienced explicit and extreme forms of racism. As a teenager, he witnessed a white town marshal murder his brother who had recently returned home from serving in the army. Perkins did not grow up in a

religious home, and he rejected Christianity because of the racism he witnessed in the church. He saw the white church as hypocritical and the black church as a mere coping mechanism. But eventually Perkins saw the power of God's grace as he witnessed the change in the lives of people who had truly encountered Jesus. Since the day he became a follower of Jesus, Perkins has devoted his life to the pursuit of racial justice and reconciliation. "My deepest desire has been that the reconciling love that God displayed on the cross would spread into all the world, and that somehow I could participate in that mission."²²

The pursuit of justice comes back to Jesus. It's his agenda and his mission. And yet He calls us into it. We may not all have the same impact as John Perkins, but we can all do something. We can build relationships with people who don't look like us and take time to listen to their stories and experiences. We can learn the richness of different cultural backgrounds by asking questions, visiting different cultures, and reading. We can speak up for the importance of racial equity and speak out against racism whenever it rears its ugly head. And we can take action, with wisdom and love, in making practical efforts to bring about the type of change that reflects the justice of God's kingdom.