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Q&A#44 Thoughts on the Social Justice Statement

September 10, 2018



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Today I am responding to the various people who have asked for my opinion on the recent Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel (<https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>).

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. A number of people have asked me for my thoughts on the Social Justice and the Gospel Statement that was released recently. And so within this video, I will give a brief summary of some of my thoughts.

I will talk about the issues more generally, and then I'll get into the document in particular and deal with some of the details within that. At the outset, I find there's a very helpful illustration within the work of Slavoj Žižek. He often tells the story of the man who was suspected of stealing from his employers.

But yet every single day, he was inspected as he left the factory, and he was just pushing an empty wheelbarrow. There was nothing inside. And so perplexed, his employers wondered exactly how he was stealing from them.

But a few days later, the penny dropped and they realized he was stealing the wheelbarrows. The point of this illustration is that, as Žižek uses, a statement is not just the claims made within it, but the very act of making a statement itself. And so within

assessing this statement, I think we need to be attentive not just to the claims made within the statement, which looking at them are fairly innocuous, but the act of making the statement itself.

What is the statement that's being made by making this statement? And that, I think, reveals a rather different picture. Within the current context, I think what we see is a lot of political and partisan positioning, and such statements are often more about that than they are about their explicit content. And even when their explicit content is addressed and challenged or criticized or supported, it is often more about where people fall in terms of their alignments and their associations and their affiliations and their brands than it is about the actual content itself.

And an objective, dispassionate assessment of where they stand relative to that is not an absolute positioning relative to the truth claims, rather it's a relative positioning to the various parties that are out there, the parties that make such a statement, the parties that pose such a statement, all these sorts of things. It's about the people with whom we are friends. And so what we see within this statement is a lot of tribal identities and alignments that are playing out in the conversation surrounding it.

The problem is that if such a statement is going to have traction, it must be on the basis of the sort of people that have joined together to form it. And I think that is one of the areas where this document initially fails. If you're going to have a credible and strong statement within the context of the debates around race and social justice, you really need to have a wide range of people.

You really need to have people who are deeply and actively engaged within the actual work of justice within society, in advocating for people who are in need, in trying to heal racial divides, in trying to tell the truth about sins and injustices of the past and the present. And unless you have that, and unless you have people from a number of different racial backgrounds at the very core group, it's not going to hold much weight. The truth does not have much traction where trust has not first been established.

I think this is one of the conversations where this is most patently evident, that there is a lack of trust, and so anything that is said is met with suspicion and antagonism. And it is seen more as a statement of tribal identity than as something that is truly a statement of the truth that goes beyond tribal identity. And that's unfortunate.

This document, for that reason, I think, comes out of the gate limping. It's also got a number of statements within it that seem to be engaging in shadowboxing and as a result implicitly misrepresenting various other parties. Other parties that, on the basis of their terminology, on the basis of their concerns and other things like that, are seen to be affiliating and associating themselves with far more problematic positions.

And that may indeed be the case, but for the most part, I do not believe that it is. I think

most people who are concerned about social justice within evangelical circles are aware of the dangers and deal with those dangers and protect themselves from going to the extremes of the social justice movements that we see within our society. They are dealing with genuine issues of injustice and it's unfortunate that those issues should be discredited or challenged on account of certain associations that might be suggested.

And so we need to beware on all sides of making this into a debate about tribalism and who we are associated with. And social media makes everything so much worse on this front. I've talked a lot about virtue signalling online.

Virtue signalling is something that is unavoidable. We're all engaged within it. A document like this is a sort of virtue signalling, a tribal marking as well.

That doesn't mean that what it says is not true, but a lot of it is about not just what is said in terms of the content, but it's about how we form our brands, who we associate with, who we are affiliated with, what images we cultivate for ourselves, all these sorts of things. And in that respect, it's very difficult to have these conversations online because it just tends to spiral out into these tribal antagonisms where anything that comes from certain quarters will be met with opposition and anything that comes from other quarters will be welcomed with open arms without actually having the critical reflection that is needed. And so if people can't find stones of criticism that they can cast at such a document, they'll search for pebbles.

The point is that they need to disassociate themselves from the signers, disassociate themselves from what they see as a toxic brand. So even if what is said is true, they need to disassociate themselves. And on the other hand, you have people who will associate themselves with that without actually asking the sort of questions that need to be asked.

Then within such a document, I think often what you see a lot of slippery statements, statements that could be taken in a number of different senses, but unfortunately will probably be taken in some senses that aren't the most felicitous. They'll be used to push out certain people and that is unfortunate and to avoid certain concerns that really need to be concerns. Now, is this document related to genuine issues within the church? I believe that it is.

I think that there are genuine problems that are presented by the social justice movements within society, deep problems. And I think we need to talk about these openly and directly. And unfortunately, we need to establish a far firmer foundation in which to do that effectively than we have done to this point.

And as a result of that failure to establish a strong foundation of credibility and trustworthiness, words can ring hollow. But that foundation is really needed because there's a lot of truth that needs to be spoken against the social justice movement as it

exists within our current context. René Girard has some very powerful statements about this that I think get at the heart of some of the issues that we're dealing with in the current context of the social justice movement.

And he talks about a movement of victimology in this context in *I Saw Satan Before Light* *Lightning*. The current process of spiritual demagoguery and rhetorical overkill has transformed the concern for victims into a totalitarian command and a permanent inquisition. The media themselves notice this and make fun of victimology, which doesn't keep them from exploiting it.

The fact that our world has become solidly anti-Christian, at least among its elites, does not prevent the concern for victims from flourishing. Just the opposite. The majestic inauguration of the post-Christian era is a joke.

We are living through a caricatural ultra-Christianity that tries to escape from the Judeo-Christian orbit by radicalising the concern for victims in an anti-Christian manner. He goes on, the attempt by Nietzsche and Hitler to make humankind forget the concerns for victims has ended in a failure that seems definitive, at least for the moment. But it is not Christianity that profits from the victory of the concern for victims in our world.

It is rather what I think must be called the other totalitarianism, the most cunning and malicious of the two, the one with the greatest future by all evidence. At present it does not oppose Judeo-Christian aspirations, but claims them as its own and questions the concern for victims on the part of Christians, not without a certain semblance of reason at the level of concrete action, given the deficiencies of historical Christianity. The other totalitarianism does not openly oppose Christianity, but outflanks it on its left wing.

All through the 20th century the most powerful mimetic force was never Nazism and related ideologies, or those that openly opposed the concern for victims and that readily acknowledged its Judeo-Christian origin. The most powerful anti-Christian movement is the one that takes over and radicalizes the concern for victims in order to paganize it. The powers and principalities want to be revolutionary now and they reproach Christianity for not defending victims with enough ardour.

In Christian history they see nothing but persecution, acts of oppression, inquisitions. And then he points to the destination of this whole cult of victimology. The Antichrist boasts of bringing to human beings the peace and tolerance that Christianity promised, but has failed to deliver.

Actually what the radicalization of contemporary victimhood produces is a return to all sorts of pagan practices. Abortion, euthanasia, sexual undifferentiation, Roman circus games galore, but without real victims, etc. Neo-paganism would like to turn the Ten Commandments and all of morality into some alleged intolerable violence, and indeed its primary objective is their complete abolition.

Faithful observance of the moral law is perceived as complicity with the forces of persecution that are essentially religious. Since the Christian denominations have become only tardily aware of their failings in charity, their connivance with established political orders in the past and present world that are always sacrificial, they are particularly vulnerable to the ongoing blackmail of contemporary neo-paganism. Neo-paganism locates happiness in the unlimited satisfaction of desires, which means the suppression of all prohibitions.

I think that's a very powerful statement of some of the things that are taking place within our current context. A challenge to anything that represents norms, a radical suspicion and distrust of Christian norms and values, an attempt to undermine them at every point in terms of a completely different code of ethics, a code of morality, a code of belief. Now I think what we see as this plays out within a society are a number of unhealthy and toxic dynamics.

First of all, truth is reduced to statements of power and self-legitimation. So all that I'm saying right now, I'm saying because I'm a cis white male, not because I believe them to be, not because they are genuinely something that has claimed to be true. We're not having a discourse about truth, we're having a discourse about power and all my claims here are just legitimation of my subject position, of my interests, of my power against the interests of others.

And so that radical suspicion of truth, the reduction of any transcendental to power and self-legitimation, what it leads to is an undermining of Christian truth more generally. Rather what we end up with is everything being about the interests of certain interest groups, the interests of the cis heterosexist patriarchy that I'm upholding by the white cis heterosexual heterosexist patriarchy that I'm upholding by maintaining my subject position, by maintaining my perspective on the truth, my truth against other people. And on the other hand, what you have is a certain elevation of the victims as saints of the new order.

They can't be challenged. You can't say anything that might offend or slight or challenge or disagree with people of colour or challenge the claims of feminism because these are sacred claims. There's a sort of religious power to these things and the way that people will treat them as taboos, as things that must be given our ultimate allegiance that hold out against all these other values within society, I think is telling.

It reveals people's sacred values and it reveals something that is a deeply toxic and dangerous system that is arising within our society. That is arising in large part because of the power of the truths that it is parasitic upon. The truths include the fact that there is a legacy of deep racial injustice, that there's a legacy of deep cruelty and that that's continuing in various ways in the present day and that these things have not just gone away.

But on the basis of that, there's a lot of things that are being used to piggyback upon that, that are piggybacking upon that. Those claims that have a moral force to them, that have a force of truth to them as well. And as people use those claims, there is a new system that's created.

And that system, among other things, is a system of guilt. A system of guilt that gains power through shame and guilt. And once you accept that guilt, you lose any ability to speak.

You lose any ability to have your voice taken seriously. Once you are labelled with guilt, you are devoid of all protection. You can be attacked, you can be stigmatised, you can be discredited in everything that you say.

And yet the people who are victims can speak as the oracles of truth in a particular way. So we see, for instance, in the recent case with Sarah Jong, the sorts of statements that she can make about white people and whiteness. There's a lot of that going around at the moment.

Blanket statements made about white people and whiteness, often ironically by white people, that are statements that are bound up with a system of virtue and guilt and victimology that is deeply toxic, that is deeply untrue, that is deeply wrong, that undermines any realisation of truth as a transcendental, as something that stands above all our systems, that stands above all our identities and that challenges them. And that applies to everyone. That applies to black women as much as it applies to white men.

This is something that is there for everyone. All of us are challenged by this truth that stands above us. And we need to have these conversations among ourselves to bring all of us under this standard, to bring all of us under this transcendental that calls all of our value systems, all of our identities, all of our perspectives into question.

But what we have when theology, for instance, in its traditional form is seen as white male, what we have is the denial or the undermining of the fact that theology is talking about a truth that exceeds our identities. Now, as it does that, it is always hampered and compromised by the fact that people are viewing it from a compromised and sinful vantage point, a vantage point that's limited by their cultural background, that's limited by the ways that they have been raised, by the values that they have. Now, that's something that affects us all.

Now, that's something that we should all be seeking to overcome. And theology has often been mindful of this. It's been pushing back against Western prejudices and seeking to inhabit an understanding that we find within, for instance, first century Israel, trying to understand texts of the New Testament on their own terms or texts of the Old Testament on their own terms.

And that attempt to overcome and to challenge our vantage point is something that has always been an important part of theology. But with this increasing claim that theology is so contained and controlled and limited and circumscribed by the vantage point of the person engaging within it, what we end up with are just competing power claims. So my claims of theology are not statements, truth statements really at all.

They're just statements that dissemble an assertion of my identity over others. They are power claims dressing up as truth claims. But on the other hand, what we have increasingly are these contextual theologies that are, in their own way, pushing certain identity claims over others.

So whether it is black theology, whether it's feminist theology, often what these things are doing are asserting and legitimating identities and perspectives rather than actually thinking about a truth that challenges all our perspectives. It may legitimate them at certain points, but it's challenging ultimately all of our perspectives. And so that's a challenge.

The deep suspicion that we have at the heart of these systems of victimology, of these systems of social justice as they function within the broader society, those are deeply corrosive of Christian truth. But many people who are Christians who are speaking about social justice are aware of this and they're concerned to guard themselves against those dynamics. They are not the extreme progressive Christians.

They are people who are evangelicals who are taking racial injustice seriously. And so we need to be careful not to bear false witness against them. Now, there are people who genuinely fit the bill of the opponents of this document.

So Union Seminary recently produced a list of tweets that really illustrates the sort of person that the document was written against, the sort of movement and the liberal ways of approaching these issues that this document stands over against. And I think it's important to recognise there are these people out there. But for the most part, this document is an intramural debate about intramural debates within evangelicalism that make it very difficult for truth to emerge because most of the people within evangelicalism who are advocating for social justice are not falling into these liberal traps.

And so we need to be aware of victimology and social justice as religion and some of the dangerous affiliations that result from that. And the way that social justice as a new religious set of values is being cynically used by business and government and all these other agencies within our society as a means of closing down Christian thought and a means of gaining their own ends. We need to be aware of all of that.

But we also need to be aware that there are truths here and that there are truths that should not be thrown out just because we recognise the ways that they've been exalted

into the form of an idol. Just because they've been exalted into the form of an idol does not mean that they do not have great truth on their side, nor that we do not have falsehood on our side that needs to be challenged by them. We also need to be aware of the dangers of the movements of intersectionality, the intersectionality approach which fractionates all these identities into overlapping systems that would see, for instance, focus upon what it means to be a black lesbian woman as distinct from just a black man or someone who's a white woman and focusing upon all these overlapping and fractionated identities.

And then as a secondary related movement, relating all these systems of domination together and agglomerating all these issues in big floppy narratives that prevent discriminating judgments and careful local and sort of prudential engagement that we need to engage in. Those are deep problems within our current context and there's, on the one hand, there is truth within the intersectional approach. There are sets of problems that someone who is, for instance, someone who's a black woman will face a different set of problems than someone who's a white woman.

And even though they have in common the fact that they are both women, the fact of race will add further complexity to that. That's a very important thing to take into account. But on the other hand, what you have is this joining of issues to each other, this agglomeration of issues.

We see it already within, for instance, the LGBTQ plus labels. All these issues kind of sticking together. And so you have these separate distinct identities, lots of little distinct identities, but then those identities are stuck together in these big clumps that make it very difficult to separate them out and to speak about them carefully and critically.

And it also creates these big narratives, the cis-hetero patriarchy, or talking about whiteness and white supremacy. And it leaves us ill-equipped to engage in local and prudential discussions. It also leaves us primed to blow up all these different issues into big, grand issues and all these different antagonisms.

So, for instance, particularly when there are cases that are borderline that can be read in different ways, it will be a what colour is the dress moment? So Serena Williams being a recent case, is she being discriminated against because she is a black woman? And this is about black female anger and that being stigmatised within our society. Or is it something that is just she's being penalised for something that she's done wrong and she has no right to complain and she's acting in an unsporting and petulant manner. And so you have all these debates about these sorts of cases, which are just unhelpful.

They make it very difficult to think clearly because that case, which should be dealt with on its own merits, suddenly becomes a symbol of everything. It becomes a symbol of women's rejection of the patriarchy. It becomes a symbol of race.

It becomes a symbol of... Williams gets exalted to the level of a saintly crusader against the white patriarchy. And that's very difficult because when you actually look at her case, she's maybe not the best example in this particular instance of that. There are ways in which her case is a difficult one to adjudicate.

Now, I think she was treated unfairly, but there's a lot more going on within that case. And so I can understand why people would read it in different ways. And so when we raise each one of these ambiguous, local, controversial, particular cases up to this level of great symbolism, we end up with just a fueling of antagonisms.

And everyone sees these cases differently and we become more and more polarised about them. And the releasing of a statement like this is such an example. Everyone sees this, the statement that's being made by the statement, in different ways.

For some, it's a statement made against the liberalism of the social justice movement, the movement that would associate Black Lives Matter with queer black womanhood, which was involved in its founding. And for others, it's seen as dealing very specifically with an issue of, a more general issue of the weaponisation or the militarisation of the police and the excessive measures of policing that exist within society and the breakdown of trust between police and the black community. Those are issues that are very significant.

But the more that these become agglomerated with other issues, the harder it is to speak about them without them throwing out all these other symbolic tensions and things like that. So for instance, when Nike released their recent advert that's about believing in something, even if it means sacrificing everything, all the symbolism that's associated with that and the protest of kneeling and representing Black Lives Matter, all of that is connected with Nike and Nike and all these things become a greater network and complex of symbolism. And so when you speak into this or when you buy their products, you're buying into that.

And this makes these conversations incredibly difficult because we're all engaged in brand management now. Who are we affiliating with? What way do we want to brand ourselves? And so these statements come into this context in a way that stumbles into it and can only lead to greater conflict, I think, unfortunately. What should we make of the statements within the statement itself, the different articles? I'm going to look through the different articles here and comment upon them one by one.

The scripture statement, I think, is at points fairly biblicist, which is unfortunate. It says, for instance, we further deny that competency to teach on any biblical issue comes from any qualification for spiritual people other than clear understanding and simple communication of what is revealed in the scripture. I think that's a very slippery statement.

We need competency to teach on biblical issues relates to a lot of different areas of training. It relates to philosophical training. It relates to training in biblical languages.

It relates to training in sociology and training in history and training in all these other areas. And just having your Bible alone is not enough. This sort of biblicism is fairly unhealthy, and we need to push back against that.

Earlier, we deny that the postmodern ideologies derived from intersectionality, radical feminism, and critical race theory are consistent with biblical teaching. Again, this seems more like signalling than anything else. What intersectionality are we talking about? There's a lot of sense that's spoken by intersectionality, radical feminism likewise, and critical race theory likewise.

Why should we just dismiss everything that falls under the label of postmodern? There are a lot of things within the postmodern movement that can be taken on board. They present a radical but fitting challenge to much that is unhealthy about modernism. And in some respects, it could equip a half-turn back to pre-modern understandings, which would get us more in line with biblical understandings of these issues.

And so I'm deeply suspect of statements like that, that are just blanket statements that do not allow for the discrimination that we really need to do when engaged with concepts like postmodernism or intersectionality or feminism. I mean, what feminists are we talking about here? Why radical feminism? Are we talking about radical second-wave feminism? Are we including third-wave feminism here? What other sorts of feminism are being implied? And what particular movements within feminism? There are so many different forms that feminism takes. Are we talking about the sort of neoliberal lean-in feminism? Are we talking about the radical feminism in mind, Shulamith Firestone or something like that? Who are we talking about here? Are we talking about Jemaine Greer and others who have challenged the trans movement in their statement that trans women are women? There's so much that is not unpacked here that really needs to be unpacked if we're going to make these blanket statements.

The second statement about the image of God, I think, is generally okay. But again, I think people do a lot of work with the image of God concept the concept doesn't actually do within scripture and we need to find other things to do that lifting, heavy lifting. The third statement on justice, we affirm that societies must establish laws to correct injustices that have been imposed through cultural prejudice.

Cultural prejudice is an incredibly slippery term. I mean, what are we including there? There are a lot of things that are cultural prejudice that would seem to be fairly legitimate. And then at points, there are statements that are almost theonomic.

We deny that true justice can be culturally defined or that the standards of justice that are merely socially constructed can be imposed with the same authority as those that

are derived from scripture. We further deny that Christians can live justly in the world under any principles other than the biblical standard of righteousness. Relativism, socially constructed standards of truth and morality and any notions of virtue and vice that are constantly in flux cannot result in authentic justice.

Well, I think I know what they're trying to challenge with this. Again, it's so slipperily worded. We deny that Christians can live justly in the world on any principles other than the biblical standard of righteousness.

What exactly does that mean? There's a lot of standards within the world that are not explicitly biblical, but are prudent, that are based upon natural law, that are appropriate and that are fitting. And so are we going to dismiss those as well? Again, I think we need to be very careful of the way we just express these things. The statement on God's law, again, at points, it seems to fall short.

There should be more said. On the sin statement, there's an important challenge, I think, to notions of collective guilt. There is so much business that the concept of collective guilt has been made to do that is unhealthy.

But yet, merely rejecting that concept isn't enough. We need to think about some of the phenomena that we're dealing with and give better categories. You can't beat something with nothing.

And this document, at many points, is just dismissing something without presenting a stronger alternative. And so it also has a fairly individualistic understanding of these things. Collective guilt is a problematic concept in the ways that it's often used.

But there are simple systemic structures within society. How do we talk about those? There are also systems of oppression within society that are not necessarily the result of people's sin, but are still oppressive. And we could argue, in a certain sense, is demonic.

We need to talk about those well as well. And again, the lack of this is a problem within this document. This sort of statement, again, there just needs to be so much more said.

Now, that's fair enough, but there's a lot that could also be said here. I mean, what about cultures that aren't speaking truthfully about the sins of the past, that aren't clearly enough laying out those sins, that aren't seeking to deal with the legacy of those sins? There is a legacy of those sins, and that legacy hasn't just gone away. I mean, it's seen on the issue of race, for instance.

It's seen in statues. It's seen in practices. It's seen in the heroes that people have.

It's seen in the stories that are told. It's seen in symbols like the confederate flag, all these sorts of things. There is a legacy there, and that needs to be dealt with.

And the way that people deal with that can be a means of perpetuating the sins of the past. And so talking more forcefully about that, I think, is something that we need to do. But there's very little within this statement that actually points towards that.

So much of this statement is about not this, and it doesn't actually present us with any alternative. And it's certainly nothing that really challenges those who are opposed to the social justice movement, but don't really have a concern for justice themselves. If there's anyone in that position, they can read a lot of this document and not actually be propelled to do something, to actually deal with the legacy of the past.

And that is concerning to me. There needs to be more of an understanding then also of things that exceed individual sin. It's not just about individual sin.

And that concern for individual sin is a problem often because it can be connected with a concern of self-justification. What is sin? What is not? Often is concerned with how can I justify my own standing that I am not sinful? Whereas there should be another concern that's built into this, a recognition that there are forms of oppression within society that are not necessarily the result of sin on our part, but they're a result of things that are beyond our intention, beyond anyone's explicit design, but which are oppressive. And what we need to deal with those is a sense of charity, a sense of our calling to go out beyond ourselves, not to be concerned primarily about justifying ourselves, but a concern for the good of our neighbour, a concern and a love for those who are different from us in different ways, and a recognition of our being one in Christ and how that commits us to seeking their good in far more positive ways than I think this document suggests.

The statement on the gospel, again I think there are problems. It says, this also means the implications and applications of the gospel, such as the obligation to live justly in the world, though legitimate and important in their own right, are not definitional components of the gospel. I think that's just wrong.

I think this is something that is a component of the gospel. It is a necessary fruit of the gospel. That doesn't mean that it's the very, that it's what the gospel begins with in some senses, but it is something that lies at the heart of the gospel, that God is setting the world to rights.

And part of setting the world to rights is restoring things that have been broken, broken relationships, broken societies. And that is more a fruit than a root. It's not that we do these works of social justice in order to achieve the kingdom, but rather out of God's grace, the goodness of God's work, we are propelled out into the world to change things.

And if that's not a definitional component of the gospel, I think we're missing something very important. And so I know what's the concern to push back against the social gospel is appropriate. The social gospel is a dysfunctional and inappropriate way of forming this

understanding of the gospel.

But this alternative is not an alternative. It's deeply lacking. The statement on salvation is largely one that I can wholeheartedly agree with that.

But the statement on the church, the dismissal of political and social activism, I think is concerning that so much of this seems to be built against the foil of the social gospel movement, which is then read into modern movements for social justice within evangelical circles. And without a deep attempt to understand them on their own terms, or a very careful articulation of what justice actually is, what social justice looks like, there's very little of that positive, constructive work done within this document. So much of it is negative, opposed to a particular misunderstanding, in a way that closes down a particular project without actually presenting anything as a powerful alternative and compelling alternative.

And that is concerning when we're dealing with an issue that is as pressing and topical as race within our society. When we have statements like these, it likely addresses issues that need extensive and careful engagement. Even if these sorts of statements are true, even if there's a problem with the social gospel movement, and there are deep problems with the social gospel movement, we need to say something about these issues that has a bit more bite and force to it than that.

We need to present a compelling alternative. And that isn't found within this document, and I'm concerned about that. And so what is concerning to me about the document is less what the content, the explicit content says.

There are concerns for me about that. But what is left out, what is not said, what is not provided by this document, and also the statement that is made by the document itself. The statement on heresy, again, it's very much a defensive statement.

It's a statement that seems to be designed primarily to prevent the charge of heresy being levelled against a certain type of evangelical than it is about saying, how do we speak truthfully about the sins that existed within our past? How do we speak truthfully about the people who founded our movement who had deeply racist views? How do we speak about our heroes of the faith who own slaves? Do we speak about them as heretics? Well, maybe not, but what language do we use then? And that's the sort of thing that this should be providing, but it's not providing that. Rather, it seems to be pushing back against the use of language against evangelicals without actually providing a discriminating and careful language to talk truthfully about the sins within our past. And as a result, we are perpetuating certain of the sins.

If we're not going to speak truthfully about them, we're in certain respects, continuing them, we're upholding them. And so I think we need to be far more strong in the sort of language that we provide. If we're going to make a statement about race and social

justice, we need to provide a careful vocabulary to speak about the sins that exist within the nation's past, how we might be complicit with them in some ways in the present, in continuing their legacy, how we can speak about oppressive systems.

That's what we need more than anything else. And this document really is not providing that. And so I'm concerned about this on that front.

When we get to the issue of sexuality and marriage, again, the denial sections, the statement is so slippery. We deny human sexuality as a socially constructed concept. In some respects, it is.

We just need to be clear about what is meant by that. We also deny that one's sex can be fluid. We reject gay Christian as a legitimate biblical category.

Well, it isn't a biblical category, but who is claiming that it is a biblical category? Something doesn't have to be biblical to be legitimate. We don't have to find something in the Bible, nor do we have to find explicit biblical warrant for everything, for it to be legitimate. We don't have to find biblical warrant for a past to stand to deliver his sermon for it to be a legitimate posture.

These things can reek of a certain biblicism that's unhelpful. Now, when we talk about gay Christian, again, it's the sort of language that is more about tribal markers than anything else, and often is reacted to in that way, in terms of the affiliations that it suggests, rather than in terms of any substantive claim that is made by that. Because when you look at the people who are making claims about gay Christian, if you read Ron Belga or if you read someone like Wes Hill or Nate Collins, they are using gay Christian in a very stipulated sense, in sense that senses that may not be entirely felicitous, but which need to be engaged with on their own terms.

And rejecting just gay Christian outright, I think, is unhelpful. We need to be far more careful in the way that we talk about these things. We further deny that people should be identified as sexual minorities, which serves as a cultural classification, rather than one that honors the image-bearing character of human sexuality as created by God.

Again, we need to think about what weight are these things bearing? Is sexual minority just a statement of the facts that someone may be intersex, for instance? That is not necessarily a statement that they find their identity within that, that that is at the heart of their self-concept, all these sorts of things. Rather, it may just be a fact of their reality. And their identification as a sexual minority may just be a way of finding other people with whom they share some sort of shared struggle in being outside of the norm.

And that being outside of the norm may be perfectly legitimate. It may not be involved in sin or anything like that. And so we need to be careful about the way that we talk about these things, apart from anything else, just not to alienate certain groups.

There are certain groups that are in conversation about these issues, still working them out, and they're speaking often in unhealthy and unhelpful ways. But we could maybe do better by trying to help them move towards more helpful and healthy ways than just dismissing them as and rejecting them on those terms. And the race and ethnicity thing, when it talks about things like race is not a biblical category, but rather a social construct that often has been used to classify groups of people in terms of inferiority and superiority.

Yes, on one level, you can say that. Again, race not being a biblical category, there are other categories that do some of the business that race does within our society, and we need to take account of those. Also, we need to recognise that social constructs are not necessarily not real on that account.

The dollar is not a biblical category. It's a social construct, but it still has great power within our society, and we need to do business with it. We need to reckon with that concept, and we need to reckon with the way that it orders our society.

Race is a reality. The fact that it has become so much of the way that we order our society, the way that we relate to each other historically, and it has such a significant legacy, you can't just wish it away. That category exists as a social category, and social constructs can be incredibly powerful, as the example of money suggests, or the example of the way that we clothe ourselves is in large measure a social construct.

You could argue that the language that we speak is a social construct. That doesn't mean that you could just dismiss that social construct and use whatever terms you want to mean whatever you want to mean. It's just not how social constructs mean.

And so, we need to do business with race. Race exists as a fact within our society. Whatever you think about the biological fact, it is a social reality, and as a biological reality, there are realities there too.

And so, we need to deal with it on these various levels, and that requires a far more careful conversation than any side of this conversation is really allowing for at the moment. It's such a fraught and charged context that we can't even begin that conversation, unfortunately. We deny that any divisions between people groups, from an unstated attitude of superiority to an overt spirit of resentment, have any legitimate place in the fellowship of the redeemed.

Again, that can be fairly slippery. There are distinctions, but they shouldn't be divisions, sure, but what does that mean in practice? We reject any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression. Yes, that is just such a difficult statement to respond to because it seems to be designed to attack certain positions rather than provide a positive statement, a healthy statement that gives us a clear biblical standpoint from which to think about

these issues.

There are ways in which we have oppression within our past and present, and ways in which we have advantages and what we could call privileges. There are all sorts of dysfunctional concepts that exist around that, and ways in which these concepts have been used in perverse and distorted ways, but we need to do business with the fact that there are advantages and privileges that certain people enjoy as a result of historic oppression and continuing oppression in certain cases or structures of injustice. Likewise, entitled victims of oppression.

At what point does a victim of oppression, a genuine victim of oppression seeking restitution and restoration and the establishment of justice become entitled? At what point does that move over into the era of entitlement? It's not entirely clear, and when we make statements like this, often it's just a statement that's going to be weaponized against people that are referred to as entitled victims of oppression in a blanket way without actually discriminating and carefully looking through the issues that they are bringing forward and thinking about them carefully. While we are to weep with those who weep, we deny that a person's feelings of offense or oppression necessarily prove that someone else is guilty of sinful behaviors, oppression or prejudice. Sure, that's true, but there is a great deal of oppression and injustice and prejudice that exists out there.

And while we should not just treat every feeling of oppression as if it is evidence of oppression and injustice, we need to talk about the actual existence of all this oppression and injustice that is there. And when this document so focuses upon these aspects without providing a positive alternative, it presents itself as closing down a movement towards racial justice, racial reconciliation, about speaking against the legacy of oppression and injustice in society. And it leaves us hamstrung when it actually comes to dealing with these things.

And so I'm very disappointed with statements like that. We need to say so much more. And then when we get to the statements about culture, again, these sorts of things aren't as straightforward as it suggests.

We affirm that whatever evil influences to which we have been subjected via our culture can be and must be overcome through conversion and the training of both mind and heart through biblical truth. If only it were that easy. Often we need an incredible degree of prudence as well because these things are systemic.

And that's one of the things that certain people who speak about social injustice are good at speaking about. They recognize that this is not just about individual attitudes. This isn't just about people's hearts and their attitudes.

It's about structures in society that systematically, systematically disadvantage certain groups within the population. And we must have a positive concern for justice to work

through some of these issues and create a society that is hospitable and that is welcoming for all its members. And that is something that requires a positive concern for justice, not just a negative concern for how can I absolve myself of the guilt of my sin, which within the social justice movement, sin and guilt have been weaponized as a means of getting control over certain groups, of pushing certain groups down and claiming that certain groups have priority within the conversation and other groups can be discredited.

Now that's been misused, but there are these evil influences and forms of structural oppression that can't just be overcome by changing our attitudes, by getting rid of racism within our hearts. Racism is not just within our hearts. Injustice is not just within our hearts.

These are things that exist within structures, within society. And so we need to have a far better conversation about that. One that maybe relieves people of the pressure of the constant weaponization of guilt and says, this isn't about your guilt.

This isn't about you. This isn't about blaming you. This is about how can we make these things right? If someone, for instance, has been hit by a car in by some reckless driver in the past, what it means to make them whole and well will require a lot of different people pulling their weight and getting involved in the process.

It won't necessarily involve the apportioning of blame. There is blame to be apportioned, but that's not the main point. The main point is not who are we going to blame.

The main point is how are we going to set these things right? How are we going to form a society that is a society that reflects God's justice, that reflects God's goodness, that reflects the neighborhood, the neighborliness that we should experience within the church? And then the final statement on racism. We affirm that racism is a sin rooted in pride and malice, which must be condemned and renounced by all those who would honor the image of God in all people, except for such racial sin can subtly or overtly manifest itself as racial animosity or racial vainglory. Such simple prejudice or partiality force through of God's revealed will and violates the world world law of love.

We affirm that virtually all cultures, including our own at times contain laws and systems that foster racist attitudes and policies. First of all, we affirm that virtually all cultures, including our own at times contain laws and systems that foster racist attitudes and policies. True enough, but this is written against the background of specific racial injustices within a specific racial racialized context.

And in that context, it's not just a generic, oh, we're all sinful. We all struggle with the issues of race. And there is certainly racism on the side of social justice movements.

Sarah Jong and other people like that are illustrative of racist attitudes that often have

been ruled out completely in polite society when it comes to talking about any people of color that are welcomed when we're talking about people who are white. Now, that's unhealthy and dysfunctional and racist, but there's more going on here. There's a historical legacy.

And if we're saying just virtually all cultures, we're distracting from the fact that there is a particular cultural legacy that we need to grapple with. And that is just going to be dismissed if we're focusing upon just a generic sin. This isn't just about a generic sin.

There is a legacy that has a particular shape to it. It's a particular shape that isn't just about diversity. It isn't just about race in an abstract sense.

It's particularly focused upon specific relationships. It's specific relationships between certain white populations and certain black populations and the ways that those have played out in history in different contexts and places. And that's what we need to talk about.

Particular legacy of particular racial sins, not just saying, oh, we're all sinners in a way that dismisses the need to deal with these particular sins in a particular and careful way. And then the denials within that statement are equally concerning. We deny that treating people with sinful partiality or prejudice is consistent with biblical Christianity.

That's true. We deny that only those in positions of power are capable of racism or the individuals of any particular ethnic groups are incapable of racism. Again, true.

We deny that systematic racism is in any way compatible with the core principles of historical evangelical convictions. We deny that the Bible can be legitimately used to foster or justify partiality, prejudice or contempt towards other ethnicities. We deny that the contemporary evangelical movement has any deliberate agenda to elevate one ethnic group and subjugate another.

And we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues or activism aimed at reshaping the wider culture are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of scripture. Historically, such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel. All of this seems to be built against the foil of the social gospel movement, against the social justice movement.

Very little seems to be taking seriously our need to develop our understanding against scripture and the words that it speaks into our situation. And so much of it is about absolving evangelicals, absolving us from the charges that have been levelled against us. We deny that only those in positions of power are capable of racism.

Yes, but we are needing to deal with a legacy of these positions of power being used to sustain racism and using statements like this to say that we are not the only people that can use racism and be racist. Sure enough, that's true. But we need to deal with the fact

that these positions of power have been used in a racist way for a long period of time and have not really dealt with that legacy.

And they are still not dealing with that legacy. So that's a problem. We deny that systemic racism is in any way compatible with the core principles of historic evangelical convictions.

Yes, that's true. But historic evangelical convictions have coexisted with systemic racism very happily for a long period of time, and they continue to do so in certain quarters. The way that historic evangelical convictions and the core of the gospel is defined within this document are ways that they would be defined by people who kept slaves in the 1800s.

How are we going to talk about the fact that people who held historic evangelical convictions kept slaves? Again, we must come back to that point. And merely saying that they are inconsistent with each other is not actually... It's a way of absolving ourselves of the problem rather than dealing with the fact that these are the people who are our heroes. We can't just dismiss this certain part of them while celebrating them as our heroes in every other respect.

We must talk about the fact that people like J. Gresham Machen had such racist views at certain points in his life. Now, there's a possibility that he may have outgrown those through the influence of Warfield and others, and not just outgrown them as a way there's a natural process, but he might have been delivered from that sin and those attitudes that are deeply evil and corrupting. Now, until we are able to speak and face honestly up to this legacy, we will not be able to speak truth.

And statements like this are not speaking truth. They're speaking in ways that are trying to disavow connections with the unpleasant aspects of the evangelical legacy while holding on to it in every other respect. Rather, we need to be far more discriminating to recognise that we can uphold all these truths, but we need to speak about our sinfulness, that these are truths that stand against us.

They are truths that condemn us in certain points. And the Bible cannot legitimately be used to foster or justify partiality, but it has been. And we need to deal with that.

We need to set forth statements, not as defences of ourselves as evangelicals, but defences of the truth, a truth that stands over against not just the movements that would seek to reduce the Bible and Christianity to a social justice or social amelioration movement, but that stand against gospel Christians, that stand against evangelicals who will use the Bible to justify their laziness, their lack of concern about oppression within their society. It needs to be used for that too. The Bible needs to be freed from captivity, not just to the social gospel, but to the lax and the irresponsible attitude of evangelicals that are more concerned with absolving themselves of the charges that are levelled against them and keeping their movements free of blame than they are with actually

dealing with the sin and injustice that exists within society.

And so I'm concerned with statements like this, the way that they frame themselves. There are deep problems to address within our society. There are sins that must be spoken about.

There are also movements that are addressing those sins that are profoundly confused, that are elevating to the level of an idolatry victimhood, and that are corrupting and corroding the notion of truth. They are doctrines that are undermining a clear sense of the gospel. And so we need to speak about those clearly, but we can only speak about those clearly from the vantage point of a truth that transcends them.

And that truth that can transcend them is scripture, the Christian faith. It's about principles that transcend our cultural interests, that transcend our need to justify ourselves, that transcend our need to absolve our movements of blame, that transcend our need to position ourselves to be on the right, to associate with the right brands and the right parties. And until we are able to establish that as our principle, we will never be able to have a proper conversation about race.

Until we are able to have a principle that pushes us to action and does not merely close down action that's dysfunctional on the left, we will not be able to have the credibility that we need to deal with these issues. Until we have established a foundation of trust, as we bring together people from different parties, as we bring together people of different races, in support of the truth, in support of Christian faith, and in recognition of our love for one another, and our need not just to absolve ourselves of guilt and blame of sin, but our commitment to bring about the best and the good for each other in a concern for Christian love and justice. Until we've got that positive sense of Christian fellowship in the gospel, of Christian oneness in the faith, we just won't be able to have these conversations at all.

We won't have the credibility in speaking against these dysfunctional approaches, and we will more importantly be at risk of compromising our own souls. And so I believe that we need to look at statements like this carefully and critically. Think about the ways in which they point out things that are correct, not just react against them, not just play them off against them as particular foils, but speak truthfully in a way that positions ourselves so that we're not just aligning with one side or another, but we are taking the stance of a truth that stands over against all personal interests, all party interests, that stands against our own interests, that speaks truthfully about what we have done in the past, the ways that we have been complicit, that speaks about the forms of injustice, the structures of oppression, the systems of privilege that exist within society that tend to lead to problems for certain parties rather than others and that we can have advantages from.

We need to speak about those and we need to seek to form a society that is more

functional, that is more effective in bringing all parties in. Now that requires prudence. It requires prudence that the conversation again does not allow for.

The concept of mass diversity and bringing together all these parties that that is the ideal greater diversity is not. That tends to lead to dysfunction in so many different settings and yet we've been unable to speak about that because diversity has become a sacred concept. But we need to have careful conversations that are based upon truth, that's based upon stepping back from party, stepping back from the antagonisms and the reactivity that exist within that context, particularly of social media and only on such a stance I think will we be able to move forward and this is something that we've barely begun to do.

I hope that in the future we will be able to forge a greater unity in a way that will give us the foundation upon which we can strive towards a fuller and clearer truth and presentation of the gospel but that is something we're still far from and I think that this statement is an illustration of some of the problems even as it strives to be part of the solution. This is a question upon which I'm sure many of you have follow-up questions. If you do please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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Lord willing I'll see you again tomorrow.