

# Steadfast Bible Fellowship

2440 S. 141st Cir., Omaha, NE 68144

## Policy Statement on Racism and Racial Discrimination

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**Mission:** Steadfast Bible Fellowship exists to see Jesus transform lives through His Word, prayer and loving relationships.

**The Church and Racism in America's History:** America's history is littered with ugly manifestations of the sin of racism. America is the only modern nation that had racial, chattel slavery in its midst from the beginning. It was justified by seeing black slaves as property, and as only partly human (i.e., 3/5th of a human as defined in the Constitution of 1787; used in the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision to declare that all blacks, whether slave or free, were not US citizens and had no citizenship rights). Slaves were traded in the nation's capital, Washington D.C. until the Compromise of 1850, with slave pens located only a few blocks from the White House. The issues of slavery and racism split the major Protestant denominations - Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists - with the southern pastors in each justifying slavery as God's will because blacks were inferior human beings. The Abolitionist movement to end slavery had its origins in the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800s, but it took the Civil War (1861-1865) and the subsequent 13th Amendment to end this abominable institution. The Reconstruction of the South (1865-1876), which followed the Civil War, recognized the need to incorporate former slaves into the nation, and attempted to do so through the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, together with a series of Civil Rights laws. Union troops occupied the South enforcing these Amendments and laws, along with the formation of educational institutions and other agencies to help the former slaves (e.g., the Freedman's Bureau). But once Union troops left the South in 1876, the South denied blacks their role as legitimate members of the community and began to institute the laws of rigid segregation of the races (i.e., the Jim Crow laws). Blacks were now brutalized by the Ku Klux Klan and the lynching of blacks became the norm well into the 20th century. The Protestant churches across the South gave solid support for the institution of slavery before the Civil War and then attempted to give biblical support to the laws of segregation in both the north and the south from the 1870s through the 1960s. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 freed African-Americans from legalized segregation, denial of voting rights and blanket discrimination in the labor market. Nevertheless, almost everyone agrees that the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., for an integrated society in which people would be judged by character rather than color, has not been realized. Racism is sin and its ugliness remains a part of American civilization. What does God's Word say about race? How should we view people of different color? What is the biblical solution to the ongoing remnants of racism that remain?

**The Dignity and Equality of All Human Beings:** The Bible stipulates clearly that all human beings are equally worthy of honor, respect and dignity and that racism, racial discrimination and feelings of prejudice towards other human beings are sin and hurtful to God.

1. All human beings are descended from Adam and Eve. Genesis 1-3 provides the biblical and historical basis for understanding the essential unity of all human beings because they are descended from Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26ff). Genesis 2:20 declares that Eve is “the mother of all living.” In Acts 17:26 the Apostle Paul argues that God “made from one man every nation of mankind.” Finally, Paul demonstrates that what was lost for the human race through Adam’s sin is restored through the saving work of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12, 19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22).
2. Genesis 1:26 announces that “God created man in His own image...male and female He created them.” The Bible stipulates clearly that all human beings share in this status of being in the image of God. It is the basis for a system of justice (e.g., Genesis 9:6) and is the basis for treating all human beings with dignity and respect (e.g., 1 Peter 2:17 and Titus 3:2). James 3:9 even declares that being in the image and likeness of God should affect how we speak to one another.
3. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded His church to “make disciples of all nations.”
4. Acts 10:34-35: The point of this extraordinary passage is that the salvation God offers is to all humans everywhere, regardless of racial or ethnic background. Here Peter learns that “God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what it is right.” Furthermore, the Apostle Paul declares that Jews and Gentiles are equal in New Covenant blessings in the church (Ephesians 2:11-22). Jesus has indeed broken down the “dividing wall of hostility” between peoples so common throughout history (Ephesians 2:14).
5. Paul implies in Galatians 3:28 quite clearly that there should be no racial discrimination or prejudice in the church, for those “in Christ” are equal in spiritual blessings.
6. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18 establishes that from God’s viewpoint there are only two groups of human beings - those who have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and those who have not. Jesus’ death on Calvary’s cross was for all humanity.
7. In James 2:1-9, James decries the typical situation of the early church where the wealthy were given a place of privilege and honor in worship, while the poor were only permitted to sit on the floor. Such discriminatory practices violate God’s royal law, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To show “favoritism” or “partiality” (the biblical term for prejudice) is sin; it desecrates God’s holy standard of love.
8. In Revelation 7:9-10, we see the emphasis on racial and ethnic unity because the innumerable multitude of people worshiping before God’s throne in heaven includes people from every tribe and nation of the earth.

The church of Jesus Christ renounces all past attempts to use the Bible to justify racism, segregation of the races and all forms of racial or ethnic discrimination.

1. Genesis 9:20-25 together with 10:6-20 have historically been used to support the superiority of the white race and the legitimate subjugation of people of African descent. The curse of Genesis 9 has nothing to do with racial superiority, with skin color or with legitimizing slavery in the American South. The curse was on the descendants of Canaan (Ham's son) and was fulfilled in the destruction of the Canaanite people by the nation of Israel during the Conquest and later when Israel subjected the Canaanite peoples to servitude (Genesis 10:15-19; Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 1 Kings 9:20-22).
2. The Old and New Testaments were often mined by pro-slavery polemicists before the Civil War to prove that, since slavery was common among the Israelites and the early church, it was therefore justifiable. [Today, critics of biblical Christianity often condemn the Bible as not authoritative and trustworthy because it does not categorically call for the end of slavery.] This is a classic case of the need to understand the historical and cultural distance between the ancient world and our own. When we think of slavery, we think of chattel, racial slavery in the pre-Civil War South. But, in the first century, there was not a great deal of difference between the slave and the average free person. Hence, important points of historical context are necessary when we study the Bible and the issue of slavery:
  - In both the Old and New Testaments, the words used to denote slaves did not necessarily carry the same connotations that we associate with slavery today. Only by understanding the biblical texts and the cultures that produced them can we understand what is being discussed in the Bible.
  - The stealing and selling of human beings, quite common throughout human history, was a capital offense according to Old Testament law. The return of fugitive slaves to their masters was also illegal. In almost every instance, the kind of slavery governed by Old Testament law was debt-slavery, where an individual would offer labor in exchange for an outstanding debt that he could not pay. The laws that govern such transactions were given to protect the rights of such slaves, who could only serve for a maximum of six years. [See Leviticus 25; Exodus 21; Deuteronomy 15]
  - Early Christians lived under Roman law; they lacked the political influence and power to change those laws. In the Greco-Roman world, people became slaves either to pay debt, because they had been captured in war, or because they had been born into the slave class. An individual could also sell himself into slavery in order to live an easier life than he had as a freed person; one could actually advance socially as a slave. In that culture, slaves differed from freed persons in several ways: [1] They could not represent themselves in legal matters; [2] They were subject to seizure and arrest in ways that freed persons were not; and [3] Their occupation and where they lived were determined by their master. However, in Roman society, slaves could own property and other slaves, and were not enslaved based on the color of their skin. In addition, slavery was often temporary. While there were certainly very degrading and dehumanizing forms of slavery in the Roman world, many served in more dignified social positions (e.g., tutors, professors, estate managers, bookkeepers, doctors, or artisans). Roman emperors used slaves to manage imperial estates and often placed them in charge of important tasks (e.g., tailoring,

wine-keeping and tasting, and cooking). The slaves addressed in Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-25, 1 Peter 2:18-25, as well as Onesimus in Philemon, were more than likely household slaves ("bondservants").

- The early Christian community was a counter-cultural movement in which social distinctions were all but erased. Jesus was the true Lord, and masters and slaves were expected to treat one another as beloved brothers and sisters - equal members in the body of Christ. The radical transformation that took place within the Christian community was the leveling of all individuals as equal brothers and sisters in Christ (Galatians 3:28). There would have been profound implications for slaves and masters regarding one another as brothers and sisters and loving one another with sincere "brotherly affection" (Rom 12:10; 2 Pet 1:7). Indeed, Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus is nothing less than revolutionary: That he might "have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother - especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philemon 15b-16).

**Jesus Christ, the Church and the Solution:** As long as there is sin, there will be racism, and only the cross of Jesus Christ provides the solution. Therefore, the church of Jesus Christ should therefore model the supernatural impartiality that refuses to discriminate on the basis of race or ethnic origin. The church should model the reconciliation of all races and ethnic groups. The church should cut the radical path for all of society, for it alone sees people the way God sees them: All bear His image and all need Jesus Christ. The church has the radical solution to society's struggle with racism, prejudice and discrimination: Disciples of Jesus Christ love one another with the supernatural love of their Savior. The church is the living example of racial unity and harmony, welcoming and including people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds to full and equal fellowship in the body of Christ.