

Why Should We Care?

Bernard Bell, 2020.08.30
PBCC Conversation on Race, episode 2

In Episode 1 of our Conversation on Race, seven weeks ago on July 12, I gave a talk on black lives matter. Can we say “*black* lives matter”? One of the questions that keeps coming up is how do you distinguish between black lives matter and Black Lives Matter, the movement. There is a distinction between them. We are not endorsing the BLM movement. There is much in their philosophy that we disagree with. There is a reason why they hold the views that they hold. I understand that. I just don’t agree with that and most Christians would not agree with that. But here we’re talking about black lives matter. Most of the protesters out on the streets are not endorsing the movement; they are marching in solidarity with the state of black lives in America today. What I hope is that, without denying that all lives matter, that unborn lives matter, and without affirming all that the Black Lives Matter movement stands for, we can indeed say “*black* lives matter.”

In the first talk I devoted just a minute to some reasons why we should care. Tonight I am expanding on that topic, while addressing some common questions that arise. This is a difficult conversation, and many people do have questions. This is why we are calling this a Conversation to encourage these questions and to take the time to address them.

So, why should we care?

1. Why We Should Care

1.1 Justice

The first reason we should care is because of justice, both civil justice and biblical justice. Some ask whether this is even a justice issue. What is justice in general and how does it relate to this matter? I will talk first about civil justice and then about biblical justice.

1.1.1 Civil justice

Much of the structure of black slavery was built upon laws and edicts. It was therefore lawful. The European enslavement of black Africans was legalized by three Papal Bulls in the fifteenth century, edicts issued by the pope in the name of Christ to the rulers of Portugal and Spain. Black slavery in America was defined by laws in the individual colonies beginning in the 17th century, laws which, for example, defined slaves as property, as chattel, not as persons. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” but the Naturalization Act of 1790 clarified that “all men” really meant “free white persons of good character.” By the eve of the Civil War the nature of America seemed to be settled. America was white and would always be white. Blacks were slaves and would always be slaves. This was legal, constitutional, scientific, biblical, Christian, intentional and perpetual. But did its legality and constitutionality make it just? Was justice served?

We distinguish between different types of justice. Something may be legal but some at the time and others later on may recognize it as unjust. In the area of race and ethnicity this has often been true. The Civil War was fought over states’ rights, their rights to continue a system that was legal in the south but which the north had come to consider was unjust. On which side did justice lie?

After the Civil War three Amendments sought to redress what had come to be considered the injustice of the Constitution. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, the 14th granted citizenship to blacks, and the 15th extended the vote to blacks. This was an endeavor to incorporate into the idea of America black

Why Should We Care?

people as human beings, as free people, as citizens, and as people eligible to vote.

But after Reconstruction ended, the Southern states created what came to be known as the Jim Crow laws, and the era of Segregation. This was legal but was it just? The effect, indeed the intent, of these laws was to impede the implementation of the 13th and 15th Amendments. Therefore one can say that it was unjust, and that the Civil Rights movement protesting the Jim Crow laws and Segregation was a matter of justice. They were seeking to overturn laws which they considered unjust. On which side did justice lie?

These laws were dismantled by the civil rights legislation: the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). Yet even today impediments continue to be placed in the way of the implementation of this legislation and of the 13th and 15th Amendments. Wherever voting is hindered the intent of the 15th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act is being frustrated. The mass incarceration of black men has been called the New Jim Crow. It is legal but is it just and right? When legislation disproportionately and negatively affects one community, then it is legitimate to raise the issue of justice. This is our situation today.

The fact that so many encounters between black men and police officers end in death is a matter of grave concern. The shooting this week of Jacob Blake in the back seven times is just the latest example. We know about these incidents now because they are captured on cell phones by bystanders. It is this video evidence that has launched each new wave of blm protests.

The fact that the mass incarceration of the last three decades results in a third of black men cycling through the prison system suggests that we do have a problem of justice. The fact that the incarceration rate is far higher than in other countries suggests that we have a problem of justice. Yet this incarceration is done legally, under laws and under the criminal justice system. But is it really justice?

1.1.2 Why blacks?

Another question is, Why the focus on blacks? Surely *all* lives matter, *unborn* lives matter, *blue* lives matter. Why are we talking particularly of blacks? Over the past 150 years there have been other racial injustices against various ethnic groups. But in nearly all these cases, it was eventually recognized as wrong and corrective action was taken.

- The Chinese were excluded by the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), and the Naturalization Act of 1870 revoked the citizenship of naturalized Chinese Americans. Eventually the Exclusion Act was repealed and Chinese were again allowed to immigrate. Now they participate fully in American life, especially here in the Bay Area.
- The Japanese were stripped of their rights in World War 2 and locked away in internment camps, even though most of them were loyal American-born US citizens. There was a reason why this happened: there was much fear after Pearl Harbor. But eventually it was recognized that this was a travesty of justice. In 1988 an apology was issued and reparations were paid—over \$1 billion dollars. The money paid came nowhere close to compensating for the damage done, but it was an important symbolic act, a strong expression of apology and regret.
- The Jews were discriminated against. For a long time they were excluded together with blacks, for example from many country clubs.
- The Irish and Italians were excluded. They were Catholic. They were not the right sort of white Europeans. And the Italians weren't really white.

But the tide changed. It is now cool to be Jewish. It is cool to have Irish or Italian roots.

But the one constant for 400 years is the treatment of the black community. For a long time blacks were treated as less than human, as chattel. There have been consistent efforts to marginalize and exclude them from full participation in society. So this is why we are talking about the black community. It is a matter of civil justice, if America is the country of all its citizens, and all its citizens should thrive.

Why Should We Care?

1.1.3 Biblical justice

What is the Bible's concept of justice? The OT has a lot to say on this topic. In Israel the king was responsible for setting the tone of the nation:

- “So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered *justice* and *righteousness* for all his people” (2 Sam 8:15 NASB).
- The Queen of Sheba was effusive as she said to Solomon: “Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute *justice* and *righteousness*” (1 Kgs 10:9 ESV).

God's intent was for the king to do justice and righteousness for all the people. Justice and righteousness form a common wordpair in the OT. Today we hear these two words through legal, forensic ears: righteousness has to do with our salvation, with our standing before God; Christ's righteousness has been imputed to us; it's me as an individual and my standing before God. But in the OT these two words had quite a different meaning. To do justice (*mishpat*) means to maintain community order and restore it if it is fractured. Unfortunately we now hear the word “order” as Law and Order. But in the Bible, order is *shalom*, often translated peace, but a richer word than that, meaning well-being or flourishing. I tend to use the word “flourishing.” Righteousness means reciprocal faithfulness and loyalty in relationship. It is appropriate behavior within a relationship. As Shawn often reminds us, it is right-relatedness. The word first occurs in Genesis: Abraham believed the Lord, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Abraham acted in a way that was appropriate to his relationship to God. God had made a promise. Abraham's appropriate response was to believe him, to consider him trustworthy and reliable. Justice, righteousness, and *shalom* all have to do with the proper functioning of society so that all flourish. This was God's vision for Israel and its kings.

The kings of Israel and Judah quickly stopped doing this. Instead of maintaining a flourishing society, the rich and powerful oppressed the weak and the marginalized: the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, as we saw this morning in Jeremiah 7.

Justice, righteousness and *shalom*: today we would think of this as social justice. This was God's design for Israel which was in turn to be a pattern for the world. It is a more expansive view of justice than just law-keeping. It is about the flourishing and well-being of human society.

In the NT the Christians saw themselves as one family. They cared for the entire family, which crossed all boundaries of ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender. They cared for the widows. When the church in Jerusalem was suffering under a famine, other churches sent a *koinonia* gift to relieve their poverty, a gift of participation, of fellowship, expressing their care, their solidarity, and their love.

Paul praised the Thessalonians for their work produced by faithfulness to Jesus, and their labor prompted by their love for one another. Christians extended their love beyond the Christian family. When the plague repeatedly swept through the Roman Empire, the healthy pagans abandoned the cities for their country estates. It was the Christians who stayed behind and looked after the sick. Sometimes they died, but they persevered, inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. He would come back and there would be a resurrection. Therefore it didn't matter if they died.

1.1.4 Social justice

Should the church today engage in social justice? This question arises a lot. The word “social” here is a touchy one in conservative circles both Christian and non-Christian. For Christians can faith and work be reconciled? Unfortunately we tend to oppose these two. Yet Paul puts the two together: “your work produced by faith” (1 Thess 1:3), works that flows from faithfulness to Jesus.

Shouldn't the church focus on the human heart and the need for it to be renewed? It's a perennial question, especially in the American church. Shouldn't we just preach the gospel and get people saved? This comes out of the fundamentalist and dispensationalist movements. We shouldn't do anything to

Why Should We Care?

improve society on earth because the earth is just going to be destroyed when the Lord returns. So what's important is to get people saved out of this world.

But throughout history the church and individual Christians have engaged in acts of social justice, seeking to better the world. They have built schools, hospitals, orphanages, soup kitchens. They have engaged in acts not narrowly focused on preaching the gospel. So, for example, in 18th century Britain, William Wilberforce, a profligate young man, was converted. Then, because of his Christian faith and under counsel from John Newton, he embarked on the long process to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself. He labored twenty years for each of these against tremendous odds. It was his Christian faith that propelled him to do this.

It is Brian Stevenson's Christian faith that motivates him to work with incarcerated blacks in the South, seeking to reverse racial injustice in the criminal justice system.

So the Bible has this more expansive view of justice as flourishing. Many black communities in the US are not flourishing. There are also other communities that are not flourishing. For example, the Appalachian towns that were reliant on the coal industry, or the rust belt cities where heavy industry has closed. But the men of these communities are not incarcerated in high numbers, and opioid addiction is not criminalized.

Finally, we need to distinguish between retributive justice and restorative justice. Retributive justice is punishment for wrong-doing. It leads to high incarceration rates and long mandatory prison sentences. It does nothing to bring restoration and promote a flourishing society. The American criminal justice system is strong on retributive justice, and this is largely what the American public wants. But is justice being served? Or would justice be better served by restorative justice, which seeks flourishing the other side of wrongdoing?

So, blm is a justice issue on many different levels.

1.2 Compassion

A second reason we should care is out of compassion. It is good for us to have sympathy with and empathy for a hurting community. It is undeniable that the black community is hurting. In the racial injustices of the past there was no sympathy, there was no compassion. There was no compassion for the Japanese as they were being locked up in the Second World War. There was just fear. There was no compassion for the Chinese in the late 19th century. There was no compassion for the Jews fleeing Europe.

But we are the people of a God of compassion who revealed himself as "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Exod 34:6). Jesus showed compassion to many, to the people to whom we wouldn't want to show compassion. It would be good for us as Christians for our hearts to be moved in compassion.

1.3 Fruit of the Spirit

The third reason is the fruit of the Spirit. If the Spirit is at work in us that should overflow in love, kindness, goodness, gentleness in how we treat others. Including the challenge of how we treat others whom we might fear, whom we treat as Other, to whom we might find it uncomfortable to extend this.

2. Impediments to Caring

There are impediments to caring. The biggest impediment is *individualism*. We are so used to thinking of ourselves. We don't want to think of the flourishing of society. What matters is me getting ahead and prospering. We think of ourselves. The word "social" is an ugly word. Thinking collectively to ensure that society flourishes requires putting aside our individualism.

Why Should We Care?

There is *fear*, which we have to acknowledge. Many people are very afraid of black people: they fit the profile.

There is a *quest for power*. Justice often involves giving up power.

Finally, *nostalgia* for another age when we were isolated from these racial issues.

3. Our Caring Response

Once we accept that we should care, what should we do?

3.1 Sorrow

Some ask, should we feel guilty? There are some who should feel guilty. Those who participated or were complicit in acts of racial injustice. But most of us do not have that direct connection to the injustices suffered by the black communities. We weren't making the laws or enacting the policies. I think a better response for most is sorrow. Sorrow over the suffering of black communities. Sorrow over America that enacted legislation of racial discrimination. I also feel sorrow over how Scripture was misused to justify slavery.

3.2 Listen and learn

Listen: this is a major aspect of our Conversation. Last month we heard some stories. Tonight we will hear a rather different story. By listening we see the other person. We give the other person the gift of being taken seriously, of having a story that matters, a story we need to hear. We give them our attention. Jesus listened, full of compassion.

Learn: by being willing to learn we are willing to expand and perhaps change our understanding. We express humility, that we don't know the whole story, that perhaps we grew up hearing only a partial narrative, a slanted narrative.

We learn by hearing stories and reading books. We can watch movies such as *Selma*, and *13th*. Listening and learning may well make us uncomfortable. We will be confronted by some uncomfortable truths.

We can learn about those who are doing something, who are in a position to do something, such as Brian Stevenson, as described in his book *Just Mercy*, which has been turned into a movie well worth watching.

So, listen and learn.

I know many of you want to be out there and be active. But many of us are not in a position to go and do this. If we go into action too quickly without listening and learning we are likely to make the problem worse. It is OK to stay awhile in this space of listening and learning. That's what this Conversation is about.