



The Sarasota Statement: A Study Guide

This study guide is prayerfully offered by the writers of the Sarasota Statement and NEXT Church. You can find more information on the Sarasota Statement (as well as the statement itself) on the NEXT Church website: nextchurch.net/the-sarasota-statement.¹

PREAMBLE

Biblical Themes

1. Just as Jesus focused on the Kingdom of God throughout his ministry and used parables like Mark 4:1-20; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:20-21; Luke 8:16-18; and Matthew 13:33-52 to describe the Kingdom of God to those listening, so also the Kingdom of God is a central descriptor throughout the Sarasota Statement. After revisiting these parables, how might you describe the Kingdom of God?
2. The Kingdom of God is described in vivid imagery throughout the Bible. Take a look at Isaiah 11:1-9 and Revelation 21:1-5. Describe or draw what the Kingdom looks like in these passages.
3. In the Gospel of Matthew, the first words of Jesus' ministry are, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."² In the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek words translated as "repent" can include the following connotations: to feel remorse, to change one's mind, to turn back, and to return. How might these other possible translations shed light on the relationship between repentance and the Kingdom?
4. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with passages of lament — like the book of Lamentations and many of the Psalms. The authors of the Sarasota Statement write about lamenting the absence of the Kingdom of God. What absence of the Kingdom of God do you lament? Why do you think lamenting it is important for us today?
5. The Sarasota Statement hopes for the Kingdom not only in the future but also in the present. Is that just wishful thinking? As people of faith, what is the difference between wishful thinking and prophetic hope? What do you think Jesus means when he prays "your kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven" in Matthew 6:9-13?

Theological Themes

1. The Sarasota Statement claims that we can "trust in God" to usher in the Kingdom. The Scots Confession (first shared in 1561) makes this statement:
"We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust. Who is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent,

¹ NEXT Church and The Presbyterian Foundation worked together to convene this group of writers and facilitate the writing process of the Sarasota Statement in January 2017.

² Matthew 4:17

invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. By whom we confess and believe all things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, to have been created, to be retained in their being, and to be ruled and guided by his inscrutable providence for such end as his eternal wisdom, goodness, and justice have appointed, and to the manifestation of his own glory.”³

According to the Scots Confession, what makes this “trust in God” possible?

2. The Confession of 1967 describes hope for the Kingdom this way:
“God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of man’s [sic] life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes man’s natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin. It is the will of God that his purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from his creation.

Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father’s house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists his will and disrupts with an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.”⁴

Based on this text, what is hope? How is it different than optimism? What then does it mean to have hope in troubled times?

3. The Sarasota Statement claims that, “in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God includes us in the work of redeeming all creation and reconciling the whole world.” What are some examples of Jesus’ redeeming and reconciling work? How is our work different from that of Jesus?
4. How do you understand our role and responsibility in the work of Christ, given the Sarasota Statement’s claim that “God includes us in the work of redeeming all creation and reconciling the whole world”? If Jesus spoke of God’s Kingdom today, to whom would he speak and how might he describe it?

Contextual Themes

1. Lament is a key component of the Hebrew scriptures and the Sarasota Statement picks up on this practice. Church growth and evangelism expert Dr. Soong Chan Rah defines lament as “a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble.”⁵ What does it mean to “lament?” What other words can you think of like it? How is it different than those other words?
2. Lament is not a common practice in the U. S. cultural context. What factors might influence this? How might our relationship with God, our neighbor, and nature be different if lament was practiced more regularly in our churches and personal lives? How might lament be a

³ Book of Confessions (BoC), 2016, 3.01

⁴ BoC 9.53-9.54

⁵ Rah, Soong-Chan. “Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times” (p. 21). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Christian calling?

3. What do you think is meant by the word “kin-dom”? What is its relationship to of the often-used word Kingdom? What modern parables we might use today to describe the Kingdom, or kin-dom, of God?
4. The writers of the Sarasota Statement make it clear that this statement is an offering to the church written by a small, imperfect group of people. How is that different than a confession in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions?
5. The writers of the Sarasota Statement say that this statement is offered directly to those the church has harmed. Why is this important? Have you ever felt harmed by the church? Is it important for the church to speak to those she has harmed? Are there others who might also benefit from receiving this statement?
6. The authors of the Sarasota Statement hope that people “might find echoes of their own struggles and convictions, and be both comforted and challenged” as they read they document. Have you heard any echoes of your own struggles? Have you been challenged or comforted so far in reading? As you move forward, keep track of those places where you feel this way, reflect on why, and share those with your group.

PART I

Biblical Themes

1. What Bible stories come to mind to illustrate that Jesus encounters people in ways they don't expect or through people you might reject, screen, or censor?
2. The Greek word for unconditional love is *agape*. Check out the following verses that describe God's unconditional love as the kind of love Christians are called to express: Matthew 5:43-46; Matthew 22:37-40; John 3:16; John 15:9-13; Romans 5:5-8; I Corinthians 13:1-13; and 1 John 4:7-20. Based on these verses, what are some features of God's unconditional love? What are some of the specific ways mentioned in these scriptures we can live out this kind of unconditional love? What does it look like to share love with people who have repeatedly and systematically been excluded from full inclusion and worth in our society and Church?
3. Take a look at Isaiah 64:8 and II Corinthians 5:17. How do these passages describe what it means to be “undone and remade” by God through people we might not expect?

Theological Themes

1. The Sarasota Statement lifts up particular aspects of our Lord and Savior, including unconditional love, non-violent confrontation of brutality, defying racism, and aligning with the marginalized. Are there additional aspects of Jesus as Lord and Savior that you would want to specifically name if you were to write your own statement?
2. The Sarasota Statement says:
“We commit to reject and resist all racist practices, however explicit or subtle. We commit to dismantle white supremacy, including societal structures that maintain and protect white privilege.”

In the United States, the practice of slavery that bolstered the economic foundation on which this country was founded and the contemporary mass incarceration of people of color have been built on a theology of white supremacy and economic exploitation. How has scripture and theology been used to justify this?

3. The Belhar Confession, written in response to South Africa's legacy of white supremacy, states that, "God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred."⁶ How do you understand sin, death, irreconciliation, and hatred in this context? What is their relationship and how do they give rise to one another?
4. The Sarasota Statement grieves the ways we divide and segregate ourselves. How do you understand unity theologically, especially amidst difference and cultural norms of exclusion and oppression?

Contextual Themes

1. This section of the Sarasota Statement is written to "the people we ignore, reject, or demonize for living outside the tribes we claim." Who are the people we ignore, reject, or demonize – personally and tribally? What tribes do you claim for yourself? What tribes might God claim for you?
2. The writers name broken community along the worldly constructs of race, class, ideology, and belief. How do you find yourself victim to these constructs? How do you perpetuate the victimization of others through them? Are there additional worldly constructs that you view as central to the division of community?
3. In what ways does the church maintain the practice of oppression and division between God's people? How have we taken or how could we take tangible actions to repent and reconcile this?
4. How do you understand the terms "white privilege" and "white supremacy"? What would dismantling white privilege and white supremacy look like? How are we called to respond to these cultural forces? What might that involve for you personally?

PART II

Biblical Themes

1. Compare the opening of this section with "Mary's Song" in Luke 1:46-55. What echoes do you hear? What disconnects do you find?
2. One of the most quoted passages on the humility of Jesus is the "Christ hymn" in Philippians 2:1-8. After reading it, what do you find challenging in this passage? How might this passage be a guide in resisting the claiming of privilege?
3. How do you see Jesus interacting with and speaking to the political system and governmental officials around him throughout the gospels? Would you describe Christ's message as political? Apolitical? Why?

⁶ BoC 10.5

4. One of the Ten Commandments states, “You shall have no other gods before me.”⁷ Christ states “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.”⁸ How might the law and the fulfillment of the law inform your deeply held political beliefs and ideologies?

Theological Themes

1. The Heidelberg Catechism states that idolatry is “having or inviting something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in the Word.”⁹ What are some examples that illustrate this idolatry with politicians and political ideologies?
2. The Sarasota Statement refers to “God’s law of love.” How would you describe that law of love in such a way that it might guide you in relationship to political leaders?
3. Affirming that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God, the Barmen Declaration rejects the false doctrine which would have church acknowledge “other events and power, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.”¹⁰ How does this affirmation and rejection parallel this section of the Sarasota Statement? How does it diverge?
4. The Sarasota Statement holds a tension found in many of the PC(USA) confessions, namely the need to support the state while standing against misuse and abuse of power by the state. The Confession of 1967 declares:
“The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of man [sic] in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God’s purpose rather than man’s schemes will finally prevail.”¹¹
How are you seeking to work with the powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics? How are you fighting against pretension and injustice? Do you trust that God’s purpose will finally prevail? Why or why not?

Contextual Themes

1. This section of the Sarasota Statement is written to “the people we dehumanize and dismiss on the basis of political and ideological differences, and those who suffer at the hands of our idolatry.” Who falls into the categories of those you dehumanize or dismiss based on political and ideological differences? Who suffers because of idolatry you hold?
2. In what ways have you seen Jesus’ ministry and message become co-opted by political parties, either in the U.S. or abroad, that you believe was not faithful to Christ’s witness?
3. Who has been systematically excluded from democracy and equity? How do you seek to empower them?
4. Jesus came to establish the reign of God on earth. Why does the Church in every age still struggle with the acquisition of power and alignment with political, military, and economic empires?

⁷ Exodus 20:3

⁸ Matthew 22:37

⁹ BoC 4.095

¹⁰ BoC 8.12

¹¹ BoC 9.25

PART III

Biblical Themes

1. Name instances in scripture which Jesus stands with and for the marginalized, the oppressed, and victims of systemic oppression.
2. Read Psalm 46:10 and I Kings 19:11-18. What do these passages tell you about silence?
3. Read I Timothy 1:3-7. How do you seek to distinguish “meaningless talk” from “divine training”? How does this manifest itself in falsehood and complacency in today’s public square?
4. Who does scripture teach us that Jesus “sought, welcomed, and made his own”?
5. Look up Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, and I Peter 1:1-2. What do these scriptures tell us about immigrants and refugees? What other scripture passages are helpful as we think about immigrants and refugees?
6. Trace the movement of God’s people throughout the Old Testament. How might the immigration of our Biblical ancestors help inform our understanding of this section of the Sarasota Statement?

Theological Themes

1. Read the Brief Statement of Faith, paying particular attention to section 11.4. Where do you hear echoes of that statement in this part of the Sarasota Statement?
2. Jesus claimed that he was “the truth.”¹² Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”¹³ In our time, we struggle with recognizing the truth. When we look to Jesus Christ as the truth-made-flesh, how might we describe it?
3. Who are the people you find it hard to love or see as created in the image of God? Why is that the case? How will you invite God into this place of transformation and reconciliation?
4. The Westminster Larger Catechism says, “The sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment are:...concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others...”¹⁴ How might you reflect anew on the commandment to “not bear false witness against your neighbor”¹⁵ in light of this section of the Sarasota Statement?

Contextual Themes

1. This section of the Sarasota Statement is written to “the people for whom we have failed to seek justice, offer hospitality, or fully embrace as part of God’s beloved family.” Who falls into these categories? How have you participated in the failure to seek justice, offer hospitality, or fully embrace? How might you actively work on behalf of those the church has failed?

¹² John 14:6

¹³ John 18:38

¹⁴ BoC 7.255

¹⁵ Exodus 20:16

2. Why is silence important for people of privilege? Why is silence important more generally? What are the dangers of silence? When has silence been significant in your own life? When have you been silent in the face of injustice?
3. In what ways has the gospel been co-opted “for purposes of excluding those whom Jesus sought, welcomed, and made his own”? How might we decry these attempts as the Sarasota Statement suggests?
4. The final paragraph of this section makes commitments around specific brokenness in our society. How are you living out these commitments? How might your congregation seek to live out these commitments more fully? Are there other instances of brokenness that you want to include?

CLOSING

1. Why might the writers of the Sarasota Statement have included joy in this final closing section?
2. How would you describe someone who exhibits “hearty faith”? Do you share that characteristic? Why or why not?
3. The Sarasota Statement ends with words from the liturgy at the Lord’s Table: *Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!* What does ending with this formula convey to you?
4. Imagine you, like the writers of the Sarasota Statement, were tasked with writing a statement of faith that spoke a relevant word to our society today. What aspects of life today are on your heart or mind that you would address if you were writing such a statement? What theological claims are most important to highlight? What passages of scripture or confessions would you want to reference?
5. Having read the entirety of the Sarasota Statement, reflect back on the writers’ intention to name “the hope we proclaim, the ways we fall short, and the actions to which we commit ourselves.” Following that three-part structure, if you were to write a statement, what would you deem most significant for your own faith today?