

engaging

CRITICAL THEORY

and the

SOCIAL JUSTICE

MOVEMENT

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

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Ratio Christi, Latin for the reason of Christ, wants to help reverse this trend of anti-intellectual Christianity. We organize apologetics clubs at colleges, universities, and even for high school groups in order to strengthen the faith of Christian students and faculty and challenge the rampant atheism and secularism on most campuses. Our mission is to fill the intellectual gap, to make Christianity something worth thinking about, both personally and in the public square.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On December 12th, 2018 Cher and Rosie O'Donnell, two entertainers with large social media followings, had an interesting exchange on Twitter. Cher announced her support for a Joe Biden-Beto O'Rourke presidential ticket in the 2020 election. O'Donnell repudiated Biden as a candidate with a single, terse comment: "no more old white men."¹ A few months after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, an activist organization posted a letter (since removed) stating "the enemy is now and has always been the four threats of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and militarism. These forces and not Islam create terrorism. These forces, and not queerness, create homophobia."² In 2016, the peer-reviewed journal *Progress in Human Geography* published a paper on "feminist glaciology" which argues that studying glaciers through a feminist framework will lead to "more just and equitable science and human-ice interactions."³

What do these incidents have in common? We might have a vague sense that they are somehow connected to "political correctness," but may assume that no deeper ideology is at work. Perhaps they capture a kind of 21st-century progressive zeitgeist, but are otherwise unconnected.

Alternatively, we could dismiss these statements as utterly nonsensical. What does gender have to do with glaciers? How is capitalism to blame for a terrorist attack at a gay nightclub? Why should a person's age, race, or gender disqualify them from being president? We could insist that these claims should simply be ignored on the grounds that no sensible person would believe them.

Both of these reactions are understandable, but incorrect. The views expressed above are neither disconnected nor incoherent. Instead, they flow out of a knowledge area known as critical theory, which seeks to understand human relationships through the fundamental lens of power: "In the critical theory tradition...the repressive face of power that is most strikingly presented...[Critical theory] studies the systems and forces that shape adults' lives and oppose adults' attempts to chal-

1 twitter.com, Available at: <http://twitter.com/Rosie/status/1073077220707614720>

2 "In Honor of Our Dead: Latinx, Queer, Trans, Muslim, Black – We Will Be Free", *BlackLivesMatter.com*, 7/6/2016. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706053105/https://blacklivesmatter.com/in-honor-of-our-dead-queer-trans-muslim-black-we-will-be-free/>

3 Carey, M., Jackson, M., Antonello, A., Rushing, J. "Glaciers, Gender, and Science: A Feminist Glaciology Framework for Global Environmental Change Research," *Progress in Human Geography*, 40 (6), p. 770-793.

lenge ideology...[and] unmask power.”⁴

Contemporary critical theory, which we’ll distinguish from the critical tradition as a whole (see below), divides the world into oppressed groups and their oppressors along lines of race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, age, weight, and a host of other identity markers.⁵ The central goal of contemporary critical theorists is to work for the liberation of oppressed groups: “Critical theory research critiques historical and structural conditions of oppression and seeks transformation of those conditions.”⁶ Critical theorists pursue this liberatory work in part by deconstructing hegemonic narratives, which are stories, discourses, and accounts that oppressor groups offer to justify their dominance in society.

As we’ll see, proponents of feminist glaciology, the authors of the Pulse nightclub letter, and Rosie O’Donnell have views that are rooted in the basic tenets of this ideology.

In this booklet, we’ll provide an overview of contemporary critical theory. Our contention is that a careful, fair, sufficiently thorough, and nuanced understanding of contemporary critical theory is vital for all Christians, especially for Christians engaged in apologetics and evangelism. These ideas are increasingly influential in the media, on college campuses, and in the church. If we want to engage people with the message of the gospel, we need to understand the ideas and worldviews our culture is embracing and show where they are inadequate so that we can point people to the truth found in Jesus.

Our work will be divided into three sections. The first section lays out the basic, foundational premises of contemporary critical theory. It also unpacks some of America’s horrific history of racism and racial injustice to provide some context for contemporary critical theory’s appeal. The second section argues that contemporary critical theory is deeply antithetical in numerous ways to basic Biblical doctrines. Finally, the third section outlines practical strategies for engagement. How do we show that fundamental aspects of contemporary critical theory are false? How do we share the gospel with those who are influenced by these ideas? We hope this booklet will equip you to answer these questions, enable you to discern between godly and secular wisdom (Col 2:8), and assist you in taking every thought captive for the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

4 Brookfield, S.D., *The Power of Critical Theory for Adult Learning and Teaching*, Jossey-Bass, 2005, p. 120, p. 32.

5 Sensou, O and DiAngelo, R, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017.

6 Glesne, C. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An introduction*. Pearson Education, Boston, 2011.

II. UNDERSTANDING

HISTORY

We begin with a needed reminder from critical scholars Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, “Critical theory is a term often evoked but misunderstood.”⁷ It is misunderstood because it is not a singular theory, but rather a fragmented area of knowledge that influences a range of academic disciplines. The origins of critical theory are often traced to the Frankfurt School, which was founded in Germany during the 1920s by a group of Marxist philosophers and sociologists dissatisfied with the slow progress of communism.⁸ Men such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse extended classical Marxist analysis, seeking to show how workers were enslaved not merely by economic conditions but by the machinery of culture and consumerism. Such ideas laid the philosophical groundwork for the New Left: “Critical theory, especially the emotionally and sexually liberating work of Marcuse, provided the philosophical voice of the New Left. Concerned with the politics of psychological and cultural revolution, the New Left preached a Marcusean sermon of political emancipation.”⁹ In other words, critical theory worked to promote freedom and liberation not just from physical or economic bondage, but from oppressive cultural ideas and values.

While much is made of the Marxist origins of critical theory, the dependence can be overstated. Modern critical social theories draw on numerous sources beyond the Frankfurt School ranging from the post-structuralist analysis of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to the cultural studies work of Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu, to the anticolonialist writings of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire, to the numerous intersectional scholars writing in the context of feminist, queer, and race theory. Therefore, critics of critical theory should be careful not to engage in well-poisoning by slapping the label of “Marxist” on an entire, variegated discipline, just as we wouldn’t dismiss the entire field of geometry based on its historic association with Greek religion. Instead, it’s more useful to focus on the specific claims being made, independent of their origins.

7 Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, “Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research”, in *Key Works in Critical Pedagogy*, 2011, K. Hayes et al (eds.), Sense Publications, 2011, p. 286.

8 Bonner, S.E. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 2-4.

9 Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, “Rethinking...”, p. 286.

We also want to be perfectly clear that we're not attempting to characterize either the narrow iteration of critical theory espoused by the Frankfurt School or the tremendously broad tradition of critical theory in general.¹⁰ Instead, we are focusing on the particular manifestations of critical theory most relevant to contemporary culture (hence our label 'contemporary critical theory'). This ideology is promoted by a number of authors with diverse emphases including – but by no means limited to – Peggy McIntosh, Robin DiAngelo, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. While you may not recognize their names, these scholars coined or popularized phrases such as “white privilege,” “white fragility,” “colorblind racism,” and “intersectionality,” terms that are immediately recognizable to anyone who has recently spent time on a college campus, on social media, or following politics. Thus, while there are many critical social theories, our focus in this booklet is limited to the collection of ideas currently exerting the most influence on our civic discourse, our universities, and the church.

While we acknowledge (and even assert) that critical theory resists essentialism and should not be understood as a singular theory, it is nevertheless true that contemporary critical theory includes several central claims and presuppositions that serve as indispensable anchors keeping the discipline connected, identifiable, and influential.

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY & IDENTITY

Because contemporary critical theory divides society into oppressed groups and oppressor groups, many critical theorists insist that our identity as individuals is inextricably bound to our group identity. From the perspective of contemporary critical theory, our experience of reality, our evaluation of evidence, our access to truth, our moral status, and our moral obligations are all largely determined by our membership in either a dominant oppressor group or a subordinate oppressed group. It's important to note that the definition of “oppression” in critical theory differs markedly from the definition one finds in the dictionary, where “oppression” refers to “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.”¹¹ According to critical theory, “oppression” should additionally or even primarily be understood in terms of “hegemonic power,” the ability of a particular group to impose its norms, values, and expectations on the rest of society: “In any relationship between groups that define one another (men/women, able-bodied/disabled, young/old), the domi-

10 Bohman, James, “Critical Theory”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed), forthcoming URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/critical-theory/>

11 “oppression.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppression> (4 Oct. 2019).

nant group is the group that is valued more highly. Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged.”¹²

Given this definition, contemporary critical theorists view racism, sexism, classism, ableism, capitalism, heteronormativity, and cisgender privilege as forms of oppression: “People [in the U.S.] are commonly defined as other on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability. Each of these categories has a form of oppression associated with it: racism, sexism, religious oppression/anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and ableism, respectively.”¹³ In saying that a particular man is an “oppressor” the critical theorist is not saying that the man has personally ever abused his power or, for instance, mistreated women in ways that are traditionally understood as unjust. Rather, the critical theorist is asserting that the group to which the man belongs (men) has imposed its views on society regarding what is normal, expected, and valuable, thus making the man an oppressor. By establishing hegemonic norms, dominant groups conversely characterize the “Other” as abnormal, unusual, deviant, or worthless. Of course, a particular individual can participate in both oppressed and oppressor groups simultaneously, but this overlap does not reverse or overturn the respective social position of the groups to which she belongs. For example, a white woman is oppressed in terms of her gender but is still privileged in terms of her race.

One of the most important implications of contemporary critical theory’s emphasis on group identity is the moral asymmetry it assumes between different groups. Because of its collectivist outlook, members of oppressor groups are not seen as morally neutral, even if their individual behavior has been unimpeachable. For example, critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write: “The narrative behind this assumption [that affirmative action is unjust] characterizes whites as innocent...By contrast, many critical race theorists and social scientists hold that racism is pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained. If we take this perspective, then no white member of society seems quite so innocent.”¹⁴ Similarly, Peggy McIntosh, who is white, and who popularized the term “white privilege” in a seminal 1988 paper, laments: “My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor...I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will.”¹⁵ A member of the dominant group benefits from – and is morally tainted by – the privilege he obtains from his group membership.

12 Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 25.

13 Tatum, B., “The Complexity of Identity: ‘Who Am I?’”, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 11.

14 Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J., *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, New York University Press, New York, 2017, p. 91.

15 McIntosh, P. “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, Wadsworth, Belmont, 1992, p. 72.

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY & LIBERATION

A second major feature of critical theory is its emphasis on liberation: “Liberatory power is present in critical theory too, particularly in the analysis of workers’ solidarity [and] revolutionary social movements.”¹⁶ Davidson et al state: “Since its inception, critical theory has been primarily concerned with the elimination of oppression and the promotion of justice...Liberation is a theme that runs through critical theory; Liberation from objective oppressors such as colonizers and exploitive employers, and liberation from subjective forces such as mass culture and ideology.”¹⁷ In reference to critical theory, Peters, Lankshear, and Olssen assert, “Adopting the viewpoint of oppressed social groups, it expressly seeks to become an agent in the promotion of social change and transformation.”¹⁸ Renowned critical pedagogue Paulo Freire writes: “Since it is a concrete situation that the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established, the resolution of this contradiction must be objectively verifiable. Hence, the radical requirement – both for the individual who discovers himself or herself to be an oppressor and for the oppressed – that the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed.”¹⁹

The liberation of oppressed groups is the meaning that critical theorists give to the popular term “social justice”: “Working towards a celebration of diversity implies working for social justice – the elimination of all forms of social oppression...Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a person’s gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.”²⁰

It’s important to keep in mind contemporary critical theory’s definition of oppression. For example, while there is no doubt that overt sexism still exists in our society and that violence against women is a tremendous injustice, contemporary critical theory would define oppression to include not only these gross manifestations of misogyny, but the entire system of ostensible male supremacy and social dominance. As long as men still impose their “male” norms and values on culture, women are an oppressed group that needs to be liberated. Consequently, critical theorists would work to fight not only against sexual harassment and domestic vio-

16 Brookfield, S.D. *The Power of Critical Theory for Adult Learning and Teaching*, 2005, p. 120.

17 Heather Davidson et al, “Power and Action in Critical Theory Across Disciplines: Implications for Critical Community Psychology”, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2006, p. 36.

18 “Introduction: Critical theory and the Human Condition” in M. Peters, C. Lankshear, & M. Olssen (Eds.), *Critical Theory and the Human Condition: Founders and Praxis*, Peter Lang, New York, 2003, p. 5.

19 Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, The Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2005, p. 50.

20 McClintock, M. “How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 483.

lence, but against more subtle forms of male supremacy like the existence of traditional gender roles in marriage or assumed color preferences in children’s nurseries and clothing.

Critical theory’s pronounced focus on liberation has the effect of minimizing, relativizing, or even negating the existence of other moral duties. Critical theorists will speak extensively about our obligation to overturn oppressive systems, to liberate the marginalized, and to seek justice, but will rarely speak about other moral virtues like honesty, kindness, chastity, patience, and forgiveness. Moreover, there are cases in which virtues like marital fidelity, modesty, or civility will be problematized as constructs of oppressor groups that need to be challenged rather than obligations that need to be honored.

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY & ACCESS TO TRUTH

A final core component of contemporary critical theory is its understanding of how our social location – that is, our membership in dominant or subordinate social groups – impedes or enables our perception of truth. Recall that oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups by imposing their values and norms on culture. The dominant group then justifies their oppression by appealing to a hegemonic discourse, a story they tell to justify their position of power and privilege. This narrative can be a transparently cynical ploy to maintain control. More often though, it is a false but genuinely believed appeal to supposedly “objective” arguments and rationalizations. Richard Delgado writes: “Ideology – the received wisdom – makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural. Those in power sleep well at night; their conduct does not seem to them like oppression.”²¹ Similarly, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes: “at no point in history have dominant groups, whether capitalists, men, or whites, proclaimed that their domination is rooted in unfairness and oppression or characterized their behavior as abominable. Hence, whether in the slavery, Jim Crow, or post-civil rights eras, whites have never acknowledged any wrongdoing.”²²

This understanding of the relationship between cultural hegemony and truth has two important implications.

First, contemporary critical theory insists that an oppressor’s perception of reality is necessarily distorted by his participation in structures of power. His identity, values, and sense of control are all tied up in false and oppressive social constructs. Consequently, he has both conscious and subconscious motivations to ignore and resist any challenges to his supremacy. To put it another way, it is claimed that op-

21 Delgado, E. “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others,” *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 87, No. 8, p. 2411-2441.

22 Bonilla-Silva, E. *Racism Without Racists*, 4th edition, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2014, p. 19.

pressor groups create the very structures they use to judge others. Moreover, they are blinded by those very structures as they maintain their privilege at the expense of the oppressed. Robin DiAngelo states, “Whites also produce and reinforce the dominant narratives of society – such as individualism and meritocracy – and use these narratives to explain the positions of other racial groups.”²³ Critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, contends, “The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves, they cannot see that...for them, having more is an inalienable right...More and more, the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionable powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order.”²⁴

Conversely, contemporary critical theorists maintain that an oppressed person’s perception of reality and apprehension of truth is enhanced by her social location. Such a view is germane to standpoint theory, a social theory organic to Marxism, repurposed by feminist theory, and crystalized and pioneered by feminist scholar Sandra Harding.²⁵ While an oppressed person may internalize the false narrative of her oppressors, her subordinate position makes possible the creation of a liberatory consciousness. This consciousness enables her to construct counter-narratives which challenge the false narratives of oppressor groups attempting to control her. Oppressed people therefore have an advantage over oppressors when it comes to understanding reality. To borrow a point of emphasis from Paulo Freire, they are better able to “read the world.” Their “lived experience” of oppression gives them special access to truths that are generally concealed from dominant groups, giving them unique authority and insight to lead in the liberation of both themselves and their oppressors: “It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves.”²⁶

This advantage is multiplied by the phenomenon of intersectionality, which exists whenever a particular person lives at the intersection of multiple oppressed groups. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Because race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, nationality, and religion constitute major axes of power in early twenty-first century global politics, they catalyze multiple forms of social inequality. Intersectionality contributes the important insight that social inequalities are multiple, complex, and mutually constructing” and by so doing “offers a more robust analysis of social inequality.”²⁷ In the same way that a woman has access to truths

23 DiAngelo, R., *White Fragility*, 2018, p. 27. Beacon Press, Boston, 2018, p. 27.

24 Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 59-60.

25 For a discussion of Harding’s view of Standpoint Theory see Rosendahl, J., Zanella, M.A., Rist, S., and Weigelt, J., “Scientists’ situated knowledge: Strong objectivity in transdisciplinarity”, *Futures*, Vol 65, 2015, p. 19.

26 Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York, p. 56, 2005.

27 Collins, P., “Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2012, Vol 26, No. 2, p. 455.

unavailable to a man and a disabled person has access to truths unavailable to an abled person, so a disabled woman has access to truths unavailable to either an abled woman or a disabled man.

The second implication flows from the first: members of dominant groups need to defer to the claims of subordinate groups. Demands for “objective evidence” and a desire to engage in “rational dialogue” are seen as invalidating the oppressed person’s lived experience. An oppressed person doesn’t need evidence or arguments to obtain knowledge about oppression; she lives it every day!

Moreover, so-called “objective evidence” and reason can themselves be seen as Western constructs which exalt masculine and reasoned “ways of knowing” over intuitive and embodied “ways of knowing.” Education and critical scholar Karen Barbour states:

Within Western contexts, ‘knowledge’ was traditionally defined as that information gained through reason... discovering truth and reality through rational method, impartiality, detachment, and objectivity...Typically men were the only legitimate holders of knowledge... feminists and phenomenologists have suggested that ‘knowing’ can be based upon lived experience. From lived experience knowledge could be constructed by individuals and communities, rather than being universal and resulting strictly from rational argument.²⁸

Sociologists Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins in the opening chapter of their seminal anthology, *Race, Class, and Gender*, are similarly dismissive of the centrality, preeminence, and indispensability of reason. They state, “The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically Western and masculine way of thinking—one that we will challenge throughout this book.”²⁹

POSITIVES OF CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY

The first way in which contemporary critical theory’s core concerns overlap with Christianity is in its recognition that oppression is a sin. Throughout the Bible, oppression and injustice are identified as profound evils. God calls his followers to demonstrate their faith by liberating the oppressed, securing justice for the vulner-

28 Barbour, K., “Embodied Ways of Knowing”, *Waikato Journal of Education*, 2004, pp. 227, 230.

29 Andersen, M. and Collins, P. *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. 7th Edition, p. 15.

able, and comforting the suffering. This message appears again and again on the pages of Scripture (Pr. 3:27-28, Is. 1:17, Zech. 7:8-10, 1 John 3:17, etc...). The paradigmatic act of salvation in the Old Testament was God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and Jesus himself is called "oppressed and afflicted" (Is. 52:7). Of course, one significant caveat is that contemporary critical theorists define oppression differently than the Bible. In the Bible, oppression is not associated with hegemonic narratives, but with physical violence, cruelty, enslavement, and theft. Consequently, Christians should be very careful not to assume that what critical theorists call "oppression" is actually oppression from a biblical perspective. We also note that the Christian's concern to liberate those who are truly oppressed and to secure justice for the vulnerable are a fruit of the gospel, but not the gospel itself.

A second overlap between critical theory and Christianity is the recognition that power can corrupt our perception of reality. It does not take an extensive study of history or psychology to recognize that human beings have a propensity for self-deception. Given the right incentives, we twist reality to suit our desires, and power is a strong incentive. Theologically, the doctrine of human depravity provides an explanation of this phenomenon and shows how Christians can have tremendous blind spots when it comes to areas in which we have a vested interest. Christians should approach subjects like racism, sexism, and classism with humility, recognizing that our salvation in Christ does not make us sinless or infallible interpreters of Scripture or reality.

However, the significant difference between a critical theorist's approach and the Christian's is the inherent asymmetry posited between oppressed groups and oppressor groups. As we have already indicated, to the contemporary critical theorist, it is privilege and power which blind oppressor groups to reality. In contrast, Christians identify sin, not privilege, as the cause of our blindness. Sin is present both in members of dominant groups and in members of subordinate groups. Both the power and privilege of the oppressor and the bitterness and anger of the oppressed can lead them to misinterpret Scripture and empirical evidence. Consequently, all people are fallible. No group should insist that their "lived experience" exempts them from testing their beliefs against the Bible and objective reality.

Third, critical theorists are correct in identifying "hegemonic power" as a real phenomenon. Systems and institutions enshrine values and expectations that will strongly influence us, whether consciously or subconsciously. For example, Hollywood and Madison Avenue objectify women, promote casual sex, and endorse views of human sexuality that deeply contradict Scripture. Christians need to be mindful of the messages they are imbibing and test everything against God's perspectives, standards, and expectations (2 Cor. 10:5, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Finally, any discussion of the positive aspects of critical theory would be incomplete without a discussion of race and racism. While race – as it has been understood legally and historically – is a social construct, it has played an important and ignominious role in U.S. history. Without question, critical theory has made the

most inroads in the American church precisely because it meets the topic of race head-on and promises a solution to the persistent racial violence and division that has characterized our country since its inception. Although we can't devote much space to this crucial topic, a brief overview of race is therefore important to understand why so many Christians are attracted to critical theory.

RACE & RACISM

Slavery was an integral part of our nation's informal beginnings. The "institution of slavery" in the United States began in the early 1600s with the "20. and odd Negroes" arriving at Virginia³⁰ and with the construction and launch of ships built for the express purpose of holding and shipping enslaved human beings as cargo to be used in trade, to be exchanged for various goods, including "salt, cotton, tobacco, and Negroes."³¹

The vast majority of slaves resided on large plantations where the conditions were beyond brutal: fourteen hour days of back-breaking work, routine whippings and executions, women and young girl slaves regularly raped and sexually abused, living conditions often worse than that of livestock. The psychological, emotional, and spiritual toll on our fellow image bearers living in constant fear and violence under the yoke of slavery is incalculable.

The exponential growth of the slave populations in the colonies began in the early 1700s as more and more slaves were needed to fuel the ever-expanding plantation system driving the newly forming economy. With the introduction of rice cultivation in the south, the south became known as the "Rice Kingdom" and the "free" labor of slaves became essential to its economic success. As slave populations became more dense in the colonies and in the states after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, a number of laws were passed to further extinguish any hope of freedom for Blacks (of African origin or otherwise). To name just a few: hereditary slave laws that made children of enslaved mothers slaves for life, anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting marriages between Whites and non-Whites, laws restricting the education of slaves as education often led to stronger desires for freedom and insurrection, laws pertaining to manumission prescribing harsh penalties to any slave owners who desired to free their slaves, and the Naturalization Act of 1790 which denied citizenry to anyone who was not a free White.

In addition to the dreadful existence of being a working slave on a plantation, the journey from Africa to the West Indies that slaves endured – the infamous Middle Passage – is beyond belief and almost beyond description. We

30 Although we recognize that African slaves arrived even earlier. See Guasco, M. "The Fallacy of 1619: Rethinking the History of Africans in Early America", *Black Perspectives*, 2017.

31 National Geographic Resource Library, "A History of Slavery in the United States."

suggest *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, to get a firsthand account of the evil and horror of the Middle Passage. Slave narratives are a gut-wrenching must-read for anyone trying to understand this period in our nation's history and Equiano's work is unparalleled in our judgment. Despite the high view of human rights and dignity embedded in our founding documents, they provided no relief for non-Whites, because -tragically- they had zero application to black and brown people when they were written and ratified. The provisions of our founding documents were only extended to Whites. Slaves, Free Blacks, Native Indians, and immigrants were excluded.

Even the abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not secure Blacks equal status. Immediately after the ratification of the 13th amendment in 1865, and at the beginning of Reconstruction, many southern states began to enact a series of discriminatory laws known as black codes. Black codes were concerted efforts to keep Blacks and the concerns of Blacks out of civic life, depriving them of a number of societal rights including the right to vote, the right to own and carry weapons, the right to serve on juries, and the right to own, rent, or lease land. In addition, these codes required and enforced overbearing and punitive labor contracts designed to restrict and defraud Blacks of their rightful wages.³²

As wicked as black code laws were, their worst characteristic was that they set legal precedent for Jim Crow laws. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision rendered in 1896, which affirmed the constitutionality of "separate but equal" facilities, began 70 years of Jim Crow—laws that feigned equality in the context of racial segregation. In truth, these pernicious laws were radically against equality and led to massive marginalization and disenfranchisement of African Americans in all areas of society. Through the efforts of a number of civil rights leaders including now Congressman John Lewis, Dorothy Height, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr enough pressure was put on Congress to bring about important civil rights legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, effectively ending Jim Crow.

It should be obvious that 346 years of slavery, exclusion from Constitutional rights, Black Code laws, and Jim Crow will severely impede if not outright destroy a people. Descendants of slaves and others who were systematically brutalized and disenfranchised naturally feel the residual effects of this oppression. These effects appear in a number of categories where African Americans have experienced significant deficits including civic support relationships, educational attainment and opportunities, vocational attainment and opportunities, and inherited wealth and resources.

Given critical theory's emphasis on power and how power has been operative in society and given the prevalence of systemic and widespread overt racism

32 *Facing History and Ourselves*, "Mississippi Black Codes (1865)." <https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/mississippi-black-codes-1865> (Accessed Oct. 4, 2019)

throughout much of our nation's history, we can see why it is attractive to many in trying to understand the implications of this history for contemporary society. Being able to appreciate the truths that critical theory helps illuminate, including truths about racism and injustice, is crucial for the apologetic task. If we fail to understand and appreciate the insights of critical theory, we're less likely to be given a fair hearing when we raise objections to it. We do not want in any way to quench the zeal of Christians who are moved by our sordid past and are zealous to fight against racism wherever it persists. Indeed, we should all be so moved. We would simply insist that contemporary critical theory is not the way. It promises what it cannot deliver because it is rooted in ideas that are unbiblical. As we'll argue in the next section, contemporary critical theory is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity in innumerable ways and will seriously undermine the theology of anyone who tries to combine its foundational presuppositions with a Christian worldview.

III. CRITIQUING

There are many ways in which critical theory stands in opposition to Christianity, but the most basic conflict comes from the standpoint of worldview. A worldview is an overarching story or metanarrative that answers basic questions about life, meaning, and morality: “What are human beings?” “What is wrong with the world?” “What is our ultimate purpose?” “How should we live?”

Christianity answers these worldview questions in the following way: “Human beings are created in the image of a good and loving Creator. Our primary identity comes from our relationship to him. We rebelled against God, bringing sin and suffering into the world. God sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross and to be raised from the dead to rescue us from our sin. Our purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We look forward expectantly to the return of Christ when he will gather his Church, consummate all things, and establish a new heavens and new earth.” As a worldview, Christianity provides a framework through which we understand all of reality. All of the elements of Christian theology, ethics, and practice fit naturally into this framework.

In contrast, contemporary critical theory provides very different answers than Christianity. If we asked the same questions, contemporary critical theory would respond: “We are members of social groups locked in a struggle for power. Our primary identity comes from our relationship to other groups. Suffering is caused by systems of oppression. Our purpose in life is to fight against the subjugation of dominant groups, so that we can eventually achieve a state of equity.” It’s impossible to synthesize these two metanarratives, because we will constantly be forced to choose between them in terms of priorities, ethics, values, and goals. In what follows, we’ll lay out just a few of the more significant ways in which the basic assumptions of contemporary critical theory contradict a Christian worldview.

EPISTEMOLOGY

The first way in which critical theory and Christianity are at odds is in their respective epistemologies, that is, how they claim we come to know truth. As Christians, we believe that we obtain knowledge by using reason to understand God’s revelation in nature and in Scripture. When we study science or economics or phi-

losophy, we are using reason to understand the works of God in the universe he created. When we study Scripture, we are using reason to understand the words of God in the Bible he inspired.

Because we are sinful and because our reason and our knowledge are incomplete, our reason and knowledge will be fallible. We should always be open to correction. But if we want to understand truth, reason and logical argument are necessary tools that God has given us. This fact is particularly important in the realm of theology and is a crucial component of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. God has given us his words. We understand words primarily through reason, not through lived experience or mystical insight. One of the most brutal struggles the early church faced was against Gnosticism, a movement which insisted that certain spiritual truths could only be obtained through secret knowledge available to select individuals. Contra Gnosticism, the church insisted Christian theology had to be founded on public revelation God had supplied to the Church from its inception.

In contrast, recall that contemporary critical theory insists that members of oppressor groups are blinded by their privilege and members of oppressed groups have special access to truth that should not be challenged. Consequently, if a privileged person disagrees with the claims of the critical theorist, the critical theorist need not appeal to objective evidence or to Scripture. He can insist that the privileged person's social location has twisted their understanding and that they need to listen to and accept the claims of marginalized groups (as represented by the critical theorist).

But what if the person challenging the critical theorist's claims is himself a member of an oppressed group? Here, the critical theorist can appeal to "internalized oppression." According to contemporary critical theory, internalized oppression occurs when subordinate individuals are so immersed in the ideology of the dominant group that they come to believe it.³³ At this point they have not achieved a "liberatory consciousness" which would allow them to understand their true position.³⁴ Their criticisms can again be dismissed as attempts to defend the power of the ruling class.

Such an approach to truth is dangerous because it forecloses on the possibility of challenging the claims of the critical theorist, effectively undermining the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Regardless of whether critique comes from a member of an oppressor group or a member of an oppressed group, the critical theorist believes he need not justify his claims by appealing to reason, to evidence, to argument, or even to Scripture. He can appeal to "lived experience" and can dismiss any objection as either "privilege" or "internalized oppression."

33 See Pyke, K.D. "What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries," *Sociological Perspectives*, 2010, Vol. 53, Is. 4, pp 551-572.

34 See Love, B.J. "Developing a Liberatory Consciousness" in "Readings for Diversity and Social Justice", Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 470-474.

IDENTITY

A second conflict between contemporary critical theory and Christianity comes from their respective understandings of identity. For Christians, our fundamental identity as human beings is derived from our relationship to God. All human beings are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27) and therefore bear inestimable value and dignity (Ex. 20:13; Ps. 139:13-14). All human beings are fallen in sin (Rom 3:23; 5:12, 18a) and are therefore in need of mercy (Titus 3:5). And all human beings need the redemption and restoration that is only offered in Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5). These three core identity markers unite all people across lines of race, class, and gender and form a basis for solidarity. We cannot look at any human being as wholly "other" since they, like us, are image-bearers and sinners who need a Savior.

In contrast, because contemporary critical theory is not rooted in a theistic worldview, there is no "vertical" element of our identity. Instead, our identity is derived entirely from our "horizontal" relationships to other people and other demographic groups. Similarly, because we do not share fundamental identity markers with all human beings, our membership in certain groups becomes all-important. The oppressed person has few, if any, bases for solidarity with her oppressor. He is the "Other" and the oppressor's identity is defined by his oppression, just as her identity is defined by her experience of oppression.

Although this view of identity will have dangerous effects on social cohesion and public life, it will be utterly disastrous for our view of the church. The New Testament insists that, in Christ, God has broken down all the barriers that divided us, both from himself and from each other. In saying that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female" (Gal. 3:28), God is not saying these characteristics no longer exist; they do (Rev. 5:9, 7:9). However, they are no longer our primary identity. Instead, our shared identity in Christ has swallowed up these other identity markers such that they are to be considered as "dung" or "rubbish" (Phil. 3:8) when compared to our new identity in Christ (Gal. 2:20).

In addition, critical theory's vision of identity will bring the world's enmity into the church. Because contemporary critical theory insists that our status as individuals is inseparable from our group membership, the Church can no longer be seen as a single body united under the lordship of Christ. Instead, it will have to fracture along lines of race, class, and gender. We will have to approach each other not strictly as brothers and sisters in Christ, but as oppressed Christians and oppressor Christians. This seismic, schismatic, and ultimately heretical shift in our view of fellow believers will have catastrophic consequences for Christian unity.

HEGEMONY

According to contemporary critical theory, a hegemonic discourse is a story the ruling class tells to justify its power. Because contemporary critical theory often equates hegemonic power with evil, it views a singular narrative, a singular set of values, and a singular set of norms as inherently oppressive. This perspective places contemporary critical theory on a collision course with Christianity because the Bible is one colossal hegemonic discourse from Genesis to Revelation.

The Bible tells one singular narrative about God, about humankind, and about redemption. It provides us with one singular standard of morality by which all values and norms in every culture will be judged. It offers us one true story about gender, one true story about sexuality, and one true story about religion. Moreover, it unashamedly declares that God has all the power in the universe, is completely sovereign over our lives, and answers to no one. To critical theorists, these totalizing, comprehensive, exclusive claims are utterly unacceptable. From the perspective of contemporary critical theory, God is the Ultimate Oppressor.

MORAL ASYMMETRY

The ethics of contemporary critical theory are rooted in power dynamics. As a result, oppressed people can engage in speech, behaviors, or attitudes that would be immediately recognized as sinful were they indulged by oppressors.

A biblical view of ethics diverges from this view in two important ways. First, while the Bible does recognize that sin in Christian leaders is more serious than sin in their congregants (1 Tim. 5:20, James 3:1), the difference is in accountability, not in the standards applied. It is not true that what is intrinsically sinful for a leader is permissible for a non-leader, by virtue of their lack of power. The Bible insists that all Christians are held to the same standards of holiness, kindness, and righteousness and that we should judge all matters impartially, favoring neither those with power nor those without (Lev. 19:15, Lev. 24:22, Deut. 25:15). God's commands to particular groups never violate his universal commands to all Christians.

Second, many contemporary critical theorists insist that certain people are morally tainted by their membership in oppressor groups, irrespective of their actual thoughts, words, or deeds. However, the Bible insists that – apart from the sin of Adam – each person is guilty only for sins they have personally committed. While we don't have sufficient space to treat this subject in detail, including unpacking the unique implications of the federal headship of Adam, we'll briefly note that texts such as Ezra 9:6-15, Nehemiah 1:4-7, and Daniel 9:1-19 that indicate corporate repentance have to be understood in the light of texts like Deuteronomy

24:16, 2 Kings 12:20-21 c.f. 2 Kings 14:5-6, and Ezekiel 18:1-32 which explicitly deny that either wickedness or righteousness will be imputed from father to son, let alone from one person to another unrelated person. This truth is most clearly illustrated in Jesus himself. Jesus was a man who benefited from being male in a society dominated by patriarchy. Yet the sinless Son of God was guilty of nothing. His membership in an “oppressor” demographic group brought with it no moral breach and had zero implications relative to his moral state. The same is true for anyone who occupies “oppressor” demographic group categories today. While we can sin through actively engaging in injustice or through passively neglecting our moral duties, we are not guilty of sins we didn’t actually commit, nor are we morally tainted by merely belonging to some demographic group.

IMPLICATIONS

While these basic tenets of contemporary critical theory are sometimes articulated explicitly, they can also emerge more subtly through seemingly harmless or even laudable slogans. In this way, Christians often imbibe ideas deeply rooted in critical theory without realizing it. Only when these slogans or movements are followed to their logical conclusion do their problems become apparent. Three brief examples will show how the presuppositions of critical theory can be built into popular claims.

First, consider statements like “we should accept the claims of oppressed people” or “we should never challenge someone’s ‘lived experience.’” On the one hand, Christians should recognize that we may consciously or unconsciously devalue the testimony of marginalized groups, placing more value on the statements of people whom society deems important. The Bible repeatedly warns us against such partiality and we would do well to be aware of the natural human tendency towards prejudice and confirmation bias. On the other hand, when taken to their logical conclusion, these statements will come into conflict with any number of basic Christian beliefs. For example, contemporary critical theorists consider Muslims in the U.S. to be an oppressed group. But what happens when a Muslim insists that Islam is true? Is it permissible to challenge this claim if the Muslim feels that rejecting it will contribute to his oppression? What happens when someone’s “lived experience” is used to challenge biblical claims about sexuality? Is any disagreement equivalent to “invalidating their identity” and “erasing their existence”?

Second, consider statements like “we need to ‘decolonize our theology’” or “Christian theology needs to divest from privileged groups” or “we need to de-platform Eurocentric Christianity.” Once again, these statements contain an element of truth: every culture has blindspots that can impair one’s ability to correctly interpret Scripture. Seeking out commentators from cultures and time periods different than our own will help us reform our beliefs. That said, we should be wary of the

vague claim that we need to “de-colonize our theology.” What exactly does that mean? Do we have to jettison documents like the Westminster Confession? Do we have to reject the Five Solas of the Reformation, which were formulated by white European men? Do we need to incorporate female voices into the canon of Scripture since the Bible was written entirely by men living in a patriarchal culture? It is important to understand that while ethnic, social, or gender location, or a certain life experience, may aid in the understanding of an *application* of a certain text of Scripture, they are never *critical* to the accurate *interpretation* of any text of Scripture, that is, to the understanding of the accurate meaning of any text of Scripture.

Finally, Christians are often swept up in the call to “dismantle systems of oppression” or to “overturn institutions that promote and perpetuate privilege.” They rightly recognize that God commands us to seek justice on behalf of the poor and to defend the rights of the vulnerable. However, they can forget that words like “oppression” and “privilege” are redefined within the ideology of contemporary critical theory. Consequently, what contemporary critical theory terms “oppression” may be morally neutral or even a positive good. For example, some contemporary critical theorists identify “adulthood” as a form of oppression because parents exercise power and authority over their children, imposing values, norms, and expectations on them: “People are just beginning to have a glimpse of what oppression based on age involves...Children are...considered helpless, dependent, and cute—creatures to be cherished and taken care of...but not full human beings to be deeply respected... and trusted with significant power. They experience 10-15 years of unpaid labor and brainwashing in our current form of education.”³⁵

While few Christians are likely to endorse the idea that children need to be liberated from their parents, there are many other areas in which a fundamental commitment to “dismantling structures of oppression” will begin to undermine Christian beliefs. How can we be committed to “liberating oppressed groups from hegemonic power” while retaining Biblical norms surrounding sexuality and gender? Is it possible to oppose heterosexual privilege while still insisting that marriage should be limited to one man and one woman? Can we claim to oppose the marginalization of Muslims or Hindus while still insisting that Jesus is the only way to God?

In all of these cases, clear thinking and discernment is strongly needed. We can affirm the good in these various ideas. Yet we must also recognize that if we follow them to their logical conclusions, they are fundamentally incompatible with Christianity.

Contemporary critical theory and Christianity conflict not merely with respect to a few minor details, but with respect to basic questions of epistemology, identity, morality, and authority. To the extent that we accept and embrace fully the core principles of contemporary critical theory, we will have to abandon Christianity. And vice versa.

35 Blood, P., Tuttle, A., and Lakey, G., “Understanding and Fighting Sexism: A Call to Men,” *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, Wadsworth, Belmont, p. 139-140.

IV. ENGAGEMENT

The goal of apologetics is two-fold: to solidify the faith of Christians and to provide a defense of Christianity for non-Christians. When it comes to contemporary critical theory, Christians need to be taught how to recognize it, evaluate it, and distinguish it from biblical truth. However, Christians also need to be prepared to engage non-Christians, and possibly even fellow Christians, who have been influenced by its principles. In this next section, we'll explore the question of how we can share the gospel with people who have embraced the ideas of contemporary critical theory as their functional worldview, either explicitly or implicitly.

TRUTH & LIBERATION

As apologists, our tendency in encounters with non-Christians is often to immediately launch into questions of truth and falsehood. Our primary concern is to show that Christianity is objectively true and to do so by appealing to reason and evidence because we rightly prioritize truth over emotion. However, when we engage critical theory, this approach is likely to be unsuccessful because contemporary critical theory inherits postmodernism's skepticism towards truth. As we saw in Section II, appeals to "truth" or "reason" or "evidence" are seen as tools that the ruling class uses to justify oppression. To open a conversation with a frontal assault on the truth of contemporary critical theory is likely to trigger these defensive responses; you'll be seen as a spokesman for oppression and injustice.

We suggest taking a more strategic approach by starting with the concerns at the center of the critical theorist's worldview: oppression, justice, and liberation. To know what is truly oppressive and what is truly liberating for a human being, we have to know whether human beings have a purpose. Do we have an intrinsic nature that we must respect if we are to truly flourish? Do we have a fundamental identity that we need to acknowledge if we are to truly know ourselves? It's at this point that questions of truth can be brought into the conversation. If there is no God and human beings have no purpose, then true freedom might be found in throwing off all constraints to live as our impulses dictate. But if God exists and created us to truly flourish only when we know him, then rejecting his authority over us will bring us death rather than life, and slavery rather than freedom.

An alternative approach is to show that the rejection of truth-claims as bids for power is self-refuting. To say “all truth-claims are bids for power which can therefore be rejected” is itself a truth-claim. On its own terms, it is a bid for power which can also be rejected. Similarly, the idea that “hegemonic narratives should be ignored because they are stories that groups tell to justify their own authority” is also an attempted hegemonic narrative being told by a group (contemporary critical theorists) to justify their own authority. Thus, on its own terms, contemporary critical theory should be rejected.

All of these lines of reasoning are meant to lead us back to the appropriate starting point: truth. A person who wants to seek justice must be willing to seek the truth and must not dismiss claims about truth as irrelevant or as mere bids for power.

MORALITY & THE BASIS OF JUSTICE

A related issue is the basis or ground of morality. It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that contemporary critical theorists are relativists, given their indebtedness to postmodernism. However, contemporary critical theory is unavoidably realist in its moral outlook. Critical theorists’ writings are suffused with normative statements: “we *ought* to dismantle racist structures,” “we *must* oppose oppression,” “we *should* seek justice for the marginalized.” These imperatives are taken to be universal and absolute, binding on all human beings at all times and in all cultures.

A similar point could be made by noting that critical theorists are selective in their opposition to the many norms, values, and expectations imposed on us by society. People are expected to wear clothing in public. It is considered “normal” to eat food, but it’s considered “abnormal” to try to survive by eating buckets of nails and paint chips. More seriously, eating patterns consistent with anorexia or bulimia are considered non-normative. Values like compassion, kindness, charity, and fairness are nearly universally praised while cruelty, vindictiveness, greed, and partiality are condemned. The fact that contemporary critical theory does not oppose all of these norms shows that it is not opposed to norms per se, but only to norms it deems “oppressive.” In other words, it is evaluating all of society’s norms against some objective standard, which it uses to determine which norms are moral and which are immoral.

The contemporary critical theorist’s insistence that an objective moral standard exists then brings her face to face with the moral argument:³⁶

P1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

36 Craig, W.L. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd edition, Crossway, Wheaton, 2008, p. 172.

P2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.

Therefore,

C. God exists.

Unlike the postmodernist, the contemporary critical theorist will cling tenaciously to premise two of the moral argument. She does not need to be convinced that racism, sexism, slavery, and oppression are objectively wicked. Yet if God does not exist, it is difficult to understand where objective, trans-cultural moral values and duties would come from. Since so much work has been done on the moral argument, we won't elaborate further. It's sufficient to point out that people influenced by contemporary critical theory are unlikely to adopt a full-blown relativistic stance towards morality, providing an important point of contact for the apologist.

JUSTICE & JUSTIFICATION

A third important area of engagement for the apologist is the doctrine of justification. People who aren't immersed in contemporary critical theory are often perplexed by its appeal. They see the bitterness, the insatiable demand for apologies, the constant fear of being denounced as a racist or a misogynist, and the ever-changing standards of acceptable behavior, and they wonder why anyone would possibly choose to embrace it. What's the attraction?

We believe the allure of contemporary critical theory is best explained by its appeal to humanity's innate religious impulses. Many people, including many atheists, have noted the similarities between critical theory and the doctrines of Christianity.³⁷ Just as Christianity teaches that all human beings are stained by original sin, so contemporary critical theory teaches that all people (or at least almost all people) are stained by their membership in oppressor groups. Just as Christianity teaches that we must confess and repent of our sin, so contemporary critical theory teaches that we must confess and repent of our participation in structures of power and privilege. Just as Christianity teaches that sin must be atoned for, so contemporary critical theory teaches that our privilege must be atoned for. Just as Christianity looks forward to a kingdom of perfect justice and righteousness, contemporary critical theory looks forward to a utopian society of perfect justice and equity.

But unlike Christianity, "salvation" in contemporary critical theory is achieved not by grace, but by works. And that is one of the appeals of contemporary critical theory. We can achieve a right moral standing within the social justice community if we try hard enough. If we act as an ally to marginalized groups, retweet the right

37 Lindsay, J. and Nayna, M. "Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice", *Areo*, Dec. 18. 2018. Available at: <https://areomagazine.com/2018/12/18/postmodern-religion-and-the-faith-of-social-justice/>

tweets, vote for the right candidates, and attend the right rallies, we can know we are one of the “good people.”

In contrast, Christianity offers us a salvation that is entirely free, based not on what we do, but on what Jesus has done for us. And when God declares us righteous, forgiven, and adopted, we can attribute it to nothing but unmerited, undeserved grace.

The apologist can make two important points based on this distinction.

First, Christians should recognize that while oppression is a sin, it is not the only sin. God commands us not just to oppose oppression, but to live lives of holiness, sexual purity, compassion, hard-work, honesty, etc. Therefore, by reducing morality to “social justice,” contemporary critical theory functions as an anesthetic, dulling our ability to feel the weight of God’s law pressing on our conscience. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7 or his words in Mark 7:20-23 are helpful in showing both non-Christians and Christians that our moral obligations extend beyond merely working for justice, touching every area of our lives. To reject this view of sin is to reject the teachings of Jesus himself.

Second, Christians can point out that contemporary critical theory places its adherents in precisely the position of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 who was “confident in his own righteousness” and “looked down on everyone else.” Those who are allies to the marginalized and work for social justice have attained that status through their own effort. Alternatively, those who refuse to divest themselves of their power and privilege are often seen as bigots who deserve nothing but disdain. In the end, both of these sentiments exalt our own virtue at the expense of others. The gospel alone can free us from this soul-destroying burden of pride.

Christians must draw out this contrast between Christianity and contemporary critical theory because it will be an insurmountable barrier to the gospel. Contemporary critical theory protects its adherents from the conviction of their own sinfulness and their need for a Savior. Until they can be brought to see that neither their status as an oppressed person nor their position as an “ally” can justify them before a good and holy God, they will see no need for the rescue that Jesus alone provides.

JUSTICE & THE CHURCH

Finally, a vibrant local church community is crucial for any Christian, and especially for Christians sharing the gospel with those influenced by contemporary critical theory. According to contemporary critical theory’s vision of reality, the world, our culture, and our institutions are locked in a struggle for dominance between oppressed and oppressor. Hegemonic power is corrupt and must be overthrown and dismantled. Yet Christianity offers an entirely different vision of reality and power, one that will be fully expressed in God’s kingdom but which is already

present in the church, the community of God's people. In the church, we see people who are antagonists in our culture united around a common Savior. In the church, we see deep friendships and love across lines of race, class, and gender. In the church, we see power used to edify, not oppress, in keeping with Jesus' commands that the greatest among us must be the servant of all (Matt. 20:26).

Of course, no church this side of eternity is a perfect representation of God's kingdom. Our sinful nature will still fracture the church and divide it. Yet the existence of a loving community of believers is a real and powerful witness not only to the truth of Christianity (John 17:20-23), but to the inadequacy of contemporary critical theory, which insists that true community can only be achieved by a focus on dismantling oppressive structures, rather than through changing hearts.

The local church also bears an important witness to God's love of the poor and vulnerable. Although the church's primary mission will always be the ministry and exposition of the word of God, the message of the gospel has implications beyond the individual salvation of Christians. We are commanded, as followers of Jesus, to meet physical needs, to seek justice, and to love mercy (Micah 6:8, Matt. 25:31-46). Again, as we point to bodies of believers who are fulfilling Jesus' commands to love their neighbors as themselves, who are involved in adoption and foster care, who are advocating for the poor, who are repudiating racism and bigotry, and who are pouring out their resources and time for the vulnerable, then it will undermine the idea that true change can only come through political activism.

V. SUMMARY

In this short booklet, we've outlined the ideology of contemporary critical theory, described some of its strengths, and pointed out its basic conflicts with Christianity. However, we discourage readers from relying solely on this material. Instead, we urge you to read primary sources. The sources cited throughout this work will be helpful in that regard. The best understanding of any subject is not gained from reading secondary material, but reading from the authors themselves, letting them speak in their own voice and articulate their own concerns.

We close by emphasizing that this work is not purely theoretical. Contemporary critical theory is highly influential on college campuses and among progressives, and is also moving into the church. Identifying unbiblical ideologies like contemporary critical theory helps us not only to evangelize non-Christians, but to equip Christians to recognize and repudiate false ideas, so that we can remain rooted and grounded in Scripture. We pray our writing will be used by God to accomplish both of these tasks. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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