

Race, Gender and the Word of God

How critical theory shapes contemporary thought

Fall 2021:1

Overall Class Objective: To gain biblical perspective on the present influence of critical theory in contemporary culture both within and outside of the church.

Class Overview

1. Recognize how concerns for social justice are unified by critical theory.
2. Understand the premise of critical theory.
3. Identify some of the prominent assertions of critical theory.
4. Delineate current terminology often connected with the application of critical theory.
5. Determine where critical theory is at odds with a Christian worldview.
6. Examine how critical theory is applied to the issue of race in our culture.
7. Explore how critical theory is applied to the concept of gender in contemporary culture.
8. Consider how Christians can constructively interact with those influenced by critical theory.

Notes

- I. The Danger of Polarized (or dichotomous) thinking
 - A. We arrive at wrong conclusions.
 - B. We lose credibility with those we seek to persuade.
- II. The Quest for Social justice
 - A. What is social justice?
 1. “Even though the meaning of social justice varies, at least three common elements can be identified in the contemporary theories about it: [1] a duty of the State to distribute certain vital means (such as economic, social, and cultural rights), [2] the protection of human dignity, and [3] affirmative actions to promote equal opportunities for everybody.” Carlos Perez-Garzon
 2. In typical critical theory literature, social justice can best be defined as “the elimination of all forms of social oppression.” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*
 - B. Why is social justice important?
 1. It is important biblically.
 - a) “You shall not **oppress** a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Exodus 23:9
 - b) “You shall not **oppress** a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.” Deuteronomy 24:14
 - c) ¹⁷ O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear
¹⁸ to do justice to the fatherless and the **oppressed**,
so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more. Psalm 10:17, 18
 - d) Again I saw all the **oppressions** that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the **oppressed**, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their **oppressors** there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. Eccl. 4:1.

- e) ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 correct **oppression**;
 bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow's cause. Isaiah 1:16, 17
- f) ¹ Cry aloud; do not hold back;
 lift up your voice like a trumpet;
 declare to my people their transgression,
 to the house of Jacob their sins.
² Yet they seek me daily
 and delight to know my ways,
 as if they were a nation that did righteousness
 and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
 they ask of me righteous judgments;
 they delight to draw near to God.
³ 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
 Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'
 Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
 and **oppress** all your workers. . . .
⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose:
 to loose the bonds of wickedness,
 to undo the straps of the yoke,
 to let the **oppressed** go free,
 and to break every yoke? Isaiah 58:1-3, 6
- g) "Thus says the Lord GOD: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and **oppression**, and execute justice and righteousness. Cease your evictions of my people, declares the Lord GOD." Ezekiel 45:9
- h) "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who **oppress** the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts." Malachi 3:5
- i) ¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who **oppress** you, and the ones who drag you into court? James 2:1-5

2. It is important politically.
 - a) Many politicians often campaign on various promises of social justice for the poor, minimum-wage workers, non-whites, immigrants, women, the disabled or LGBTQ people among others. Political power is frequently applied to address matters of social justice in the form of laws, policies and executive orders.
3. It is important culturally.
 - a) It is quite common to hear of marches or rallies by different groups, acts of protest at sports events or statements of solidarity at celebrity gatherings all intended to highlight injustice done to some particular group in society.
4. It is important ideologically.
 - a) There is a broad conceptual umbrella under which social justice issues are united. Within the purview of this canopy are gathered non-dominant entities who see themselves as victims of those with power. These might include women's groups, racial groups, ethnic groups, LGBTQ groups, single mothers, older workers or the disabled among others. This umbrella is critical theory.

III. What is critical theory?

- A. What does the "critical" in critical theory mean?
 1. Expressing or involving an analysis of the merits and faults of a work of literature, music, or art.
 2. . . . (of a published literary or musical text) incorporating a detailed and scholarly analysis and commentary.
 3. . . . involving the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment.
- B. What is the core construct of critical theory as applied to social justice?
 1. Critical theory considers culture through the lens of power.
 2. Power is viewed from the perspective of those who have it (oppressors or dominant) and those who do not (oppressed or dominated).
- C. What are the premises upon which critical theory is built? (*Neil Shenvi, shenviapolitics.com, suggests seven premises of critical theory. He sees the first four as widely accepted and the last three as popular but not as widespread. These premises are rarely, if ever, directly stated in critical theory literature. Rather, they are implied or assumed by those espousing this outlook.*)
 1. Individual identity is inseparable from group identity as 'oppressed' or 'oppressor.'
 - a) Critical theorists deny you can understand your identity apart from your membership in a dominant or subordinate group.
 - b) Shenvi quotes Peggy McIntosh, who coined the phrase 'white privilege' in a seminal 1988 paper, she writes, "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."

2. Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power.
 - a) Hegemony is “leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others.”
 - b) Critical theorists, Sensoy and DiAngelo assert, “In any relationship between groups that define one another (men/women, able-bodied/disabled, young/old), the dominant group is the group that is valued more highly. Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged. Dominant groups have greater access to the resources of society and benefit from the existence of the inequality.”
 - c) This power has nothing to do with the numerical size of the group but with the force of their influence.
 - d) Critical theorists do not insist that all members of a dominant group have directly engaged in oppressive behavior.
3. Different oppressed groups find solidarity in the experience of oppression.
 - a) Those who see themselves as victims of injustice, though they might be from very different groups, often unite their voices in opposition to the powerbrokers who are seen as oppressors.
4. Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression.
 - a) The ultimate goal of most who espouse critical theory is not simply awareness of sources of injustice but identifying and encouraging the dismantling of those structures.
5. ‘Lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression.
 - a) “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.” (Anderson and Collins in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*) Against rational thought, critical theory often advocates the weight of narrative, personal testimony and lived experience.
6. Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity.
 - a) Attempts by oppressor groups to defend their innocence by presenting objective historical facts are seen as an effort to disguise and preserve their privileged position.
7. Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way.
 - a) This is a way of talking about ‘intersectionality’ (more on this later). The idea is that a person could be categorized as being part of several groups that experience domination. For example, an individual could be black, female and lesbian. As such, she would encounter oppression unique to that identity.