**Race, Gender and the Word of God**

How critical theory shapes contemporary thought Fall 2021:4

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

# What are negative aspects of critical theory?

## Epistemology

### Epistemology is concerned with the mind’s relation to reality and considers the relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, reason, evidence and reliability.

### Both because we are sinful and because our reason and our knowledge are incomplete, our reason and knowledge will be fallible. Yet if we want to understand truth, reason and logical argument are necessary tools that God has given us.

### Critical theory asserts that members of oppressor groups are blinded by their privilege and members of oppressed groups have special access to truth because of ‘lived experience’ that should not be challenged.

### Critical theory effectively eliminates challenge to its ideas by dismissing the legitimacy of reasoned argument by dominant groups or their members as a distorted perspective due to the social location of the oppressor.

### The Bible and other objective sources of contrary evidence are thus discounted by critical theory.

## Identity

### From a biblical perspective human identity is rooted in our relationship to God.

#### We are created in the image of God. (Gen. 1:26, 27)

#### We have all sinned in the likeness of Adam. (Rom. 5:12)

#### For all people, the only solution to sin and its consequences is the redemption available through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Acts 4:12; Rom. 6:23)

### Critical theory looks only at our horizontal relationships to other people and other demographic groups.

#### In this view we do not share common identity markers with all humans beings. Instead, we are defined by our role as oppressors or oppressed. Such a view serves to alienate people from one another on the basis of race, class and gender.

#### As well, application of this perspective within the church would serve to destroy our unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Within the church our primary identity is as children of God liberated from sin and death through Christ.

## Power

### From the Bible we learn that God is omnipotent, all powerful. He uses this power for his glory and our good in the world (Eph. 1:19-21; 1 Peter 1:3, 4). He also grants power to people and institutions in the world for the good of humanity (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1, 2).

### Critical theory often equates hegemonic power with the evil of oppression and the narrative those in power tell is a narrative of self-justification.

### This would mean that the Bible is one massive hegemonic discourse and God, the ultimate oppressor.

## Guilt

### Scripture indicates that, apart from the sin of Adam, every person is guilty only of the sins they personally commit. (Though this can include sin with corporate effect.)

#### Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin. Deut. 24:16; cf. also Ezekiel 18:20

### Many critical theorists argue that members of oppressor groups are morally tainted by reason of their membership in that group whether or not they have actually participated in oppressive behavior.

### Note that Jesus, a man (thus in a dominant group) was sinless. No moral compromise was assigned to him because of his maleness in a patriarchal society.

# Positive aspects of Critical Theory.

## Critical theory focuses on systems rather than individuals.

### While human beings are individually responsible for their actions, laws, institutions and systems can dramatically amplify the effects of human wickedness.

### Slavery, Jim Crow, the Holocaust and South African apartheid are all obvious examples. Other systemic influences are much more deeply buried in a culture.

## Critical theory alerts us to the reality of unearned advantages (privileges) that dominant groups have over subordinate groups, all things being equal.

## Critical theory emphasizes the wrongness of oppression.

### Not all definitions of oppression among critical theorists would correspond with a biblical definition of oppression. Nevertheless, “when those in authority are using their power to crush and abuse the powerless, Christians should absolutely be defending the rights of the vulnerable.” (Shenvi)

## Critical theory recognizes what some call the “noetic effects of power,” how power can influence and corrupt our interpretation of evidence. We are correctly cautioned that our motives and hidden desires will tend to compromise our supposedly neutral, objective and impartial arguments.

## Critical theory seeks to give a voice to the voiceless, to give a hearing to those who are oppressed. Those who are privileged, in whatever way, will benefit from hearing the cries of those who suffer injustice.

## The significant role and evolution of racial injustice in the history of America is highlighted by critical theory. Being informed about the facts of oppression (of any kind) in our culture equips us to hear and communicate with those who need the saving grace of Christ.

1. Why critical theory cannot produce true social justice.
   1. Real social justice cannot be achieved unless we know the true purpose of human beings.
      1. Without knowing the purpose of human beings, we have no way to evaluate what is good or bad for them. (Alasdair McIntyre)
   2. Previous theories of justice, from individualism to collectivism, have failed to provide an effective foundation for equitable treatment of all people.
      1. Libertarianism – a just society promotes individual freedom
      2. Liberalism – a just society promotes fairness for all
      3. Utilitarianism – a just society maximizes the greatest happiness for the greatest number
      4. Postmodernism – a just society subverts the power of dominant groups in favor of the oppressed
2. Biblical justice alone provides an adequate basis for the proper treatment of people. (the following abbreviated summary is adapted from Tim Keller)
   1. **Community**: Others have a claim on my wealth, so I must give voluntarily.
      1. The Bible describes the world as a thoroughly inter-related community.
      2. Righteousness portrayed in Proverbs requires that “The righteous (*saddiq*) are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.”
      3. Human beings are not independent selves but creatures who belong to God along with all their wealth and possessions. Their property is not to be confiscated but voluntarily stewarded so that it might be shared (Deut. 24, 25; 2 Cor. 9:6-11). This view of property does not fit well with either a capitalist or a socialist economy.
   2. **Equity**: Everyone must be treated equally and with dignity.
      1. Practices in commerce (Amos 6:5, 6), law (Lev.24:22) and government (Is. 33:15) are to reflect equal treatment of all people regardless of wealth or status.
   3. **Corporate responsibility**: I am sometimes responsible for and involved in other people’s sins.
      1. God may hold families, groups or nations corporately responsible for the sins of individuals (Daniel 9; 2 Samuel 21; Joshua 7; Numbers 16).
      2. In these cases there may be corporate responsibility, corporate participation (Exodus 20:5) or institutionalized sin (Leviticus 19:5).
   4. **Individual responsibility**: I am finally responsible for all my sins, but not for all my outcomes.
      1. Negative outcomes can be brought about by environmental factors or the sins of others.
      2. The reality of corporate sin does not eliminate moral responsibility nor does individual moral responsibility disprove the reality of corporate evil. (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 1; Daniel 9)
   5. **Advocacy**: We must have special concern for the poor and the marginalized.
      1. 8 Open your mouth for the mute,  
             for the rights of all who are destitute.  
          **9**Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
             defend the rights of the poor and needy. Proverbs 3:8, 9
      2. **3**Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.  Jeremiah 22:3
3. Why biblical justice is superior to humanly-proposed alternatives.
   1. Only biblical justice addresses all the concerns of justice found across the fragmented alternate views.
   2. Biblical justice contradicts each of the alternate views neither by dismissing them nor by compromising with them.
      1. Biblical justice is significantly more well-grounded in that It is based on God’s character—a moral absolute.
      2. Biblical justice is more penetrating in its analysis of the human condition, seeing injustice stemming from a more complex set of causes—social, individual, environmental, spiritual—than any other theory addresses.
      3. Biblical justice provides a unique understanding of the character of wealth and ownership that does not fit into either modern categories of capitalism or socialism.
   3. Biblical justice has built-in safeguards against domination. To have a coherent theory of justice, there must be the affirmation of moral absolutes that are universal and true for all, in all cultures.
      1. Christianity does not claim to explain all reality.
      2. Christianity does not claim that if our agenda is followed most of our problems will be fixed. Christians believe that we can fight for justice in the knowledge that eventually God will put all things right, but until then we can never expect to fully fix the world.
      3. The storyline of the whole Bible is God’s repeated identification with the wretched, powerless, and marginalized. The central story of the Old Testament is liberation of slaves from captivity. Over and over in the Bible, God’s deliverers are usually racial and social outsiders, people seen to be weak and rejected in the eyes of the power elites of the world.
   4. Only biblical justice offers a radically subversive understanding of power.
      1. The Postmodern view rightly critiques the Liberal and other secular views as being blind to the operations of power and oppression at work in human life and society.
      2. Liberals rightly criticize the Postmodern for being prone (and blind) to its own forms of domination.
      3. Biblical justice, in contrast with the Liberal view, gives us a profound account of power and its corruptions, but in contrast to the Postmodern perspective, it gives us a model for changing how it is used in the world.