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

How critical theory shapes contemporary thought Fall 2021:2

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 is critical theory?

## What does the “critical” in critical theory mean?

### Expressing or involving an analysis of the merits and faults of a work of literature, music, or art.

### . . . (of a published literary or musical text) incorporating a detailed and scholarly analysis and commentary.

### . . . involving the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment.

## What is the core construct of critical theory as applied to social justice?

### Critical theory considers culture through the lens of power.

### Power is viewed from the perspective of those who have it (oppressors or dominant) and those who do not (oppressed or dominated).

## How is critical theory best described?

### While critical theory cannot be limited to a single theory, it might be very generally described as an academic quest to understand the cultural forces by which its sub-groups are privileged or oppressed and to determine how liberation for those oppressed might be realized.

### The arenas of culture to which critical theory has been applied include: race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, age and weight among many others.

## What are the premises upon which critical theory is built? (*Neil Shenvi, shenviapologetics.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.)*

### Individual identity is inseparable from group identity as ‘oppressed’ or ‘oppressor.’

#### Critical theorists deny you can understand your identity apart from your membership in a dominant or subordinate group.

#### 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.”

### Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power.

#### Hegemony is “leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others.”

#### 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.”

#### This power has nothing to do with the numerical size of the group but with the force of their influence.

#### Critical theorists do not insist that all members of a dominant group have directly engaged in oppressive behavior.

### Different oppressed groups find solidarity in the experience of oppression.

#### 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.

### Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression.

#### 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.

### ‘Lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression.

#### “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.”

### Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity.

#### Attempts by oppressor groups to defend their innocence by presenting objective arguments are seen as an effort to disguise and preserve their privileged position.

### Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way.

#### 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 (and/or are dominant). For example, an individual could be black, female and lesbian. As such, she would encounter oppression unique to that combined identity.

# What are negative aspects common to 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 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)

#### The only solution to sin and its consequences is the redemption available through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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

#### 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. He also grants power to people and institutions in the world for the good of humanity.

### Critical theory often equates hegemonic power with the evil of oppression and the narrative it tells 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.

### 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.