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

How critical theory shapes contemporary thought Fall 2021:5

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

1. Why critical theory cannot produce true social justice. (the following summary is adapted from Tim Keller’s article, *A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory*)
   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. Only biblical Christianity provides an accurate definition of human purpose.
   2. Prominent 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
         1. Emphasizes individual freedoms of safety, property, free speech and free association and therefore endorses small government and minimal taxation while advocating free market economy.
         2. It is based on the assumption that every human being belongs to him or herself, and that the outcomes of anyone’s life depends wholly on their individual choices and efforts.
      2. Liberalism – a just society promotes fairness for all
         1. This view expands human rights beyond social rights to economic rights (education and medical care).
         2. The only necessary moral standard is the pursuit of individual human rights.
         3. As opposed to the libertarian view, liberalism is believes that it is just and fair for the state to redistribute wealth through taxation and some government control of the markets.
         4. Because liberalism is highly individualistic however, it remains open to free market economy as a way for individuals to create their own happiness.
         5. Liberalism aims for equal opportunity for individuals to achieve happiness by their own effort and work ethic.
      3. Utilitarianism – a just society maximizes the greatest happiness for the greatest number
         1. Utilitarianism dominates most public discourse over public policy, and lies behind many individual justice claims. The essence of justice is the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
         2. This is another effort to have justice grounded not in moral absolutes but in some kind of “practical rationality” that assumes if something makes the majority of people happy, then it is just. Note the appeal to polls in public media implying justice is rooted in the view of the majority.
         3. Utilitarianism elevates the majority over the individual.
      4. Postmodernism – a just society subverts the power of dominant groups in favor of the oppressed
         1. All unequal outcomes in society are never due to individual actions, differences in cultures or in human abilities, but only and strictly due to unjust social structures and systems.
         2. The only way to fix unequal outcomes for the oppressed is through social policy.
         3. All religious doctrine, politics and law are always, at bottom, a way for people to get or maintain social status, wealth, and therefore power over others.
         4. Reality is viewed through the lens of power. One’s power, or lack thereof, is mapped through “intersectionality,” the social interface of one’s race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and age among many other categories.
         5. The degree of powerlessness one has enables them to see things more accurately and therefore to have more moral authority in any discussion of oppression.
         6. Power structures like academia, corporations, politics and religion all mask themselves behind the language of rationality and truth called “dominate discourses.”
2. Biblical justice alone provides an adequate basis for the proper treatment of people.
   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.” Bruce Waltke
      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 19:5-8).
   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.
4. How can we engage with those influenced by critical theory?
   1. We can affirm our concerns regarding all forms of oppression and injustice.
   2. We can raise the question of the purpose of human beings and who determines it.
   3. We can observe that when critical theory rejects the truth claims of other viewpoints, it is making its own claim to absolute truth.
   4. Likewise, we can note that when critical theorists condemn structures of power, they are putting themselves in the role of power over others.
   5. We can ask about the moral claims of critical theory when it uses words like *ought, should* and *must* in regard to the necessary measures for correcting oppression. These words assume an absolute moral standard. If it is a humanly-contrived standard, how do we know it is right or will be in the future? If not from a human source, an absolute standard implies an absolute being.