

CBC Sunday School
Critical Race Theory: What Is Critical Race Theory?
May 1, 2022

For thus says the Lord GOD: “My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing.” Isaiah 52:4

I. Discussion Questions

What comes to mind when you hear the term “critical race theory?” Where have you seen this term used? Was it painted in a positive or negative light?

II. Starting Considerations

- A. Let’s admit our own apprehension/anxiety regarding this topic, and commit to thinking carefully and graciously. Let’s assume the best of one another, and assume we are in Christ as we approach from different perspectives. Engage with actual statements, instead of reacting to perceived hidden agendas. There is much potential for division over CRT, so we want to be careful to avoid that as we discuss and examine it.
- B. Our goal is to provide light, not heat.
- C. None of us are experts in this. This does not mean we cannot make sound assessments and judgments, as guided by Scripture. It does mean we should be humble, with an attitude of learning and seeking to understand.
- D. Not everything that touches on race and racism is critical race theory (or “woke” ideology). If everything is CRT, then nothing is. We want, as best as we are able, to understand what it is.
- E. Understanding exactly what defines CRT will be made more difficult by the multitude of voices and arguments about it. It is harder to see through a challenging subject, discussion, or argument when you are in the middle of it. Again, humility and prayerful discernment are needed.
- F. Let’s assume we have something to learn from one another.
- G. We will first seek to understand CRT, before assessing and analyzing it in coming Sundays. You may not hear much biblically-based critique in the beginning. That is intentional, and does not mean critique won’t come. But our first goal is to gain some understanding and clarity.

III. Critical Theory

A. D. A. Horton¹

1. Developed in a school in Germany known as the Frankfurt School, inside the Institute for Social Research, in the 1920-30s. Max Horkmeier, a professor at the school, framed critical theory with three criteria. To be a critical theory, it must be:
 - a. Explanatory. It must explain what is wrong with the current social reality, and it must identify what powers or systems are maintaining the problem with that social reality.
 - b. Normative. The theory must be able to demonstrate patterns or repeated evidences of wrong in the society, that can be seen and criticized.
 - c. Practical. The theory must be able to put forth achievable, practical means for society to be changed or transformed.
2. Critical theory must be “critical,” meaning that it must stand in contrast to the prevailing, dominant pattern and rhythm of culture.
3. Critical theory started with close association/identification with Marxism, but has evolved and been used by many different thinkers. In its second generation, Jurgen Habermas employed critical theory to argue that religious, even Christian, voices should be given a place in society, and that society is deprived when it marginalizes religious and Christian thinkers. The point being that, according to some, critical theory does not have to be inherently Marxist or “anti-Christian.”

B. Neil Shenvi²

1. Originated in the Frankfurt School, but has evolved considerably since. “In all its iterations, it is principally concerned with hegemonic power and how that power is wielded by dominant groups.”
2. Shenvi finds it most helpful to define modern critical theory by its affirmation of several core premises.
 - a. “Our identity as individuals is inseparable from our group identity and, in particular, whether we are members of a dominant, ‘oppressor’ group or a subordinate, ‘oppressed’ group.”
 - b. “Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups by dictating and maintaining society’s norms, traditions, expectations, and ideologies.”
 - c. “Our fundamental moral duty as human beings is to work for the liberation of oppressed groups.”
3. Critical theorists often add several corollaries:
 - a. Subjective, ‘lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence and reason in understanding oppression.
 - b. Privileged groups promote their own agenda under the guise of objectivity.
 - c. Individuals who are part of more than one oppressed group experience ‘intersectionality;’ their oppression is qualitatively distinct from the oppression of the separate groups to which they belong.

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/quick-to-listen/critical-race-theory-racism-evangelicals-divided-podcast.html>

² <https://freethinkingministries.com/critical-theory-christianity/>

4. From “Social Justice, Critical Theory, and Christianity: Are They Compatible?”³
- a. Premise #1 – The Social Binary: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups.
 - i. The groups fall along the lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, etc.
 - ii. For every social group, there is an opposite group.
 - iii. People can simultaneously be part of both oppressor and oppressed groups. The more oppressed groups one fits into, the more oppressed they are.
 - b. Premise #2 – Oppression through Ideology: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power.
 - i. Hegemonic Power – The control of the ideology of society. The dominant group maintains power (intentionally or unintentionally) by controlling the ideology of society.
 - ii. The dominant social group imposes its norms to justify its own interests and support its own power.
 - iii. Oppression occurs not just with physical subjugation, but in subjugation through ideas, beliefs, laws, etc.
 - c. Premise #3 – Lived Experience: Lived experience gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth.
 - i. Dominant groups are often blinded by their privilege. They often ignore the reality of their oppression.
 - ii. Oppressed groups, due to their oppression, see the reality of culture, and the injustice therein, in a way that privileged people often cannot.
 - iii. Colloquially, oppressed are “woke,” not blind to the realities of injustice, but awake and aware of reality.
 - iv. “The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically Western and masculine way of thinking...”⁴
 - d. Premise #4 – Social Justice: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups.
 - i. The central goal of every critical theory is to achieve equity, or social justice, or liberation from oppression.
 - ii. “Liberation requires a struggle against discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexual identity, ableism and age.”⁵ (written in 1996)
5. Further explanations of critical theory:⁶
- a. “Modern critical theory views reality through the lens of power. Each individual is seen either as oppressed or as an oppressor, depending on their race, class, gender, sexuality, and a number of other categories. Oppressed groups are subjugated not by physical force or even overt discrimination, but through the exercise of hegemonic power—the ability of dominant groups to impose their norms, values, and expectations on society as a whole, relegating other groups to subordinate positions.”

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E33aunwGQQ4>

⁴ Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, “Reconstructing Knowledge,” *Race, Class, and Gender*, pp. 4-5.

⁵ Suzanne Pharr, “Reflections on Liberation” in Adams et. al., “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice,” p. 450.

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>

- b. “Critical theory functions as a worldview. It answers our most basic questions: Who are we? What is our fundamental problem? What is the solution to that problem? What is our primary moral duty? How should we live?”
- c. “Because critical theory understands all relationships in terms of power dynamics, it can’t be confined to a single issue such as class, or race, or gender. Consistency will push us to apply this framework to other areas. Critical theorists classify racism, sexism, capitalism, heteronormativity, cisgender privilege, and Christian privilege as forms of oppression.”
- d. “Critical theory claims that members of oppressed groups have special access to truth because of their “lived experience” of oppression. Such insight is unavailable to members of oppressor groups, who are blinded by their privilege. Consequently, any appeals to “objective evidence” or “reason” made by dominant groups are actually surreptitious bids for continued institutional power. This view is rooted in standpoint theory (organic to Marxism and repurposed by feminist theory), which argues that knowledge is conditioned and determined by social location.”

IV. Critical Race Theory: Definitions

A. D. A. Horton⁷

1. Five Themes:

- a. “Race is something that is manmade, and it has created privilege for something that is known as whiteness—a created American identity which immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe could assimilate. They would become white in exchange for their ethnic heritage, and that would secure them citizenship, employment, housing, and even religious freedoms and liberty.”
 - i. That is, in America people of various ethnicities stopped being known by their cultural background, such as Irish or Italian, and simply became “white,” and in so doing became part of the dominant culture.
- b. “In addition to that, racism is something that is seen as permanent in the United States of America. And a lot of that is because of the implicit racist language in our founding documents, like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.”
- c. “The third thing is that counter-stories from marginalized people are necessary. In Christian language, we call a counter-story a testimony. It’s somebody sharing their testimony of how they have interacted with racism in America.”
- d. “The fourth is that being colorblind is not being truthful.”
- e. “And then the fifth element that I would say is a common theme is that racial progress seems to only be made when “white people” are the ones who benefit from it.”

⁷ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/quick-to-listen/critical-race-theory-racism-evangelicals-divided-podcast.html>

2. Is it a comprehensive worldview? Or is its focus more specific, and only applicable to a small number of topics/questions?
 - a. “To me, a worldview would include deism, existentialism, monotheism, naturalism, new consciousness, nihilism, and pantheism. And each of those has varying beliefs as it relates to the concept of race. So, in my opinion, critical race theory is not a worldview—it’s comprised of legal scholars who are not dedicating their work to the cosmology of humanity or the universe, let alone the eternal condition of humanity. The focus of critical race theory scholars is the inequality of the law in the United States of America.”
 - b. “Their focus is the United States of America; it’s not global-centric. It throws me off when people compare critical race theory to a worldview, because as a theologian, it doesn’t give answers to some of these worldview questions.”
 - c. Horton will thus argue that because CRT is not a worldview, but simply an analytical tool, it can be employed by Christians, provided they filter out the bad and keep the good. All truth is God’s truth, and because there is some truth in CRT, it can possibly be helpful tool, or at least employed for missiological purposes.

B. Neil Shenvi

1. From “Critical Race Theory and Christianity”⁸
 - a. “Critical Race Theory is an academic discipline that attempts to understand race and racism primarily through the lens of power.”
 - b. “One of the core tenets of CRT is that racism is and always has been deeply embedded in American society.” According to CRT, racism is institutionalized in our culture – it is baked into the system.
 - c. “Supposedly “neutral” and “objective” legal standards were really mechanisms by which the ruling class concealed its self-interest.” The laws and moral codes that govern our society are founded on principles and constructs that actually exist to serve the interests of the dominant group.
 - d. “Storytelling, narrative, and reliance on the lived experience of people of color is vital to deconstructing racism.” White people tend to be socialized into white dominant culture, so they are unable to perceive racial injustice. Alternatively, people of color have unique insight into oppression and racism. The claims of the minority group have inherent authority because of this experience, and counter-claims from the dominant group are essentially and immediately invalidated, because they come from the limited perspective of dominance.
2. Unlike Horton, Shenvi will argue that Critical Theory/CRT is in itself a worldview, with its own answers about the ultimate questions of life (who are we, what is our problem, what is the solution, etc.). Thus, Shenvi will argue that CRT is incompatible with Christianity.

⁸ <https://shenviapologetics.com/critical-race-theory-and-christianity/>

C. Other Voices

1. Harper, Patten, and Wooden⁹

- a. "While no single definition exists for CRT, many scholars agree on the centrality of seven tenets:"
 - i. "Racism is a normal part of American life, often lacking the ability to be distinctively recognized."
 - ii. "racial advantage propels the self-interests, power, and privileges of the dominant group."
 - iii. "CRT gives voice to the unique perspectives and lived experiences of people of color..."
 - iv. "CRT recognizes interest-convergence, the process whereby the white power structure 'will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks only when they also promote white self-interests.'"
 - v. "Revisionist history is another tenet of CRT [which] suggest that American history be closely scrutinized and reinterpreted as opposed to being accepted at face value as truth."
 - vi. "racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status."
 - vii. "CRT critiques [claims that]: (a) [colorblindness] will eliminate racism; (b) racism is a matter of individuals, not systems; and (c) one can fight racism without paying attention to sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression or injustice."

2. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw¹⁰

- a. Six defining elements that answer the question "what is critical race theory?"
 - i. "Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life... [W]e ask how these traditional interests [like federalism, privacy, traditional values or established property interests] serve as vessels of racial subordination."
 - ii. "Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy..."
 - iii. "Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law...as critical race theorists we adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage along racial lines..."
 - iv. "Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color...This knowledge is gained from critical reflection on the lived experience of racism..."
 - v. "Critical race theory is interdisciplinary and eclectic. It borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and nationalism..."
 - vi. "Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of

⁹ Harper, Patten, and Wooden. "Access and Equity for African American Students in Higher Education: A Critical Race Historical Analysis of Policy Efforts," *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 2009, pp. 389-414.

¹⁰ Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw. "Words that Wound." pp. 6-7.

oppression. Racial oppression is experienced by many in tandem with oppressions on grounds of gender, class, or sexual orientation. Critical race theory measures progress by a yardstick that looks to fundamental social transformation. The interests of all people of color necessarily require not just adjustments within the established hierarchies, but a challenge to hierarchy itself.”

V. Vocabulary of Critical Race Theory

A. Hegemony/Hegemonic Power

1. How a dominant culture maintains its dominant position; the systems, forces, institutions, and processes that allow a dominant culture to persist, either intentionally or unintentionally.
2. Example: How the entertainment industry systemically promotes harmful and unbiblical sexuality.

B. Intersectionality

1. “the concept that subjectivity (i.e., that which influences, informs, and biases people’s judgments about truth or reality) is formed by mutually interlocking and reinforcing categories of race, gender, class, health, and sexuality.”¹¹
2. Intersectionality at its best can help us be compassionate and understanding of the situations of others, gaining insight into their perspective. At its worst, it replaces objective truth with subjectivity, and places all truth in the subjective hands of the oppressed (thereby creating a certain power in being a victim, or part of the oppressed class).
3. Example: Ruth and Naomi were particularly challenged because they were both female and poor (and in Ruth’s case also non-Israelite). Intersectionality helps us understand their plight (or the plight of the woman at the well, and the incredible, countercultural mercy of Jesus in ministering to her).

C. Whiteness/White Privilege

1. A set of privileges granted to white-skinned people and groups, which is often imperceptible to those privileged by it; and all that is done to maintain that privilege.
2. Example: Black preschoolers are statistically far more likely to be suspended.¹²
3. Example: Emojis on phones only recently represented darker skin.

D. Racism

1. Racial prejudice plus institutional power; a system of advantage/disadvantage based on race.
2. Example: People of color are not racist because they do not systemically benefit from racism, and they lack institutional power.

¹¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-christians-should-know-about-intersectionality/>

¹² <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/03/21/292456211/black-preschoolers-far-more-likely-to-be-suspended>

E. Internalized Oppression

1. When an oppressed group or individual uses the methods of the oppressing group against itself; often desiring to be part of the more highly-valued, dominant group.
2. Example: A derogatory and offensive example would be the “Uncle Tom,” a term used to describe black people who are perceived to be excessively subservient to white people.
3. Example: Cypher in The Matrix.

F. Interest Convergence

1. The white majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits their interests to do so. Black people achieve civil rights victories only when white and black interests converge.
2. Example: Some would cite Brown vs. Board of Education, with the claim being that this only happened because it advanced white interests in raising the nation’s reputation in world politics during the Cold War. Desegregation only happened once it was advantageous for white people.

VI. Discussion

Why is critical race theory discussed so much today? Why has a somewhat obscure academic theory become front and center in current, popular conversation?

Is there anything about critical race theory that you find helpful? Why?

What troubles you about critical race theory? Why?