

# Commentary: Critical [g]race theory: The promise and perils of CRT

May 17, 2021

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is provided in response to questions received about critical race theory. It is excerpted and adapted from the [original post](#) and is republished here by permission of the author and the publishers of [Keeping the Faith: Reflections of Politics & Christianity in the Era of Trump & Beyond](#) published by [KTF Press](#), which also contains a version of this article.*

Are cries for racial justice the result of real, structural injustices or simply the result of an insidious ideology manufacturing rage to indoctrinate us to a new social order? Is the fight for racial justice a legitimate roadmap to peace, or is it a road to nowhere fabricated by proponents of critical race theory?

Christians often are made to choose between the two extremes of wholeheartedly embracing critical race theory or rejecting all it has to say about race and justice. But is such a dichotomy necessary or even the right way to think about this issue?

## Where critical theorists and Christians agree

Critical theorists and evangelical Christians often disagree on the answers to key philosophical questions such as the existence of truth or the moral grounding of social justice, but we do agree that questions surrounding

these issues are crucial.

Critical theorists and evangelical Christians agree human liberation from tyrannical oppression is good, and our justice system should treat everyone fairly regardless of their economic status, race, ethnicity or gender.

We disagree on some aspects of what “human liberation” or “justice” look like. But we all agree racial discrimination is wrong.

C.S. Lewis wrote: “The man who agrees with us that some question ... is of great importance can be our friend. He need not agree with us about some answer.”

## Defining ‘critical’

The “critical” part of critical theory originates with [Immanuel Kant](#), who critiqued—examined and questioned—the validity of universally accepted theories of his time. He assumed traditional theories were uncritical of power and injustice.

Critique was further developed in the 1940s, when Max Horkheimer and his colleagues wanted to understand why capitalism and authoritarian Marxism failed to provide human freedom. They critiqued what they saw as oppressive abuses of power and attempted to map a path to freedom from oppression.

Critical theory breaks down, however, in rejecting all narratives purporting to explain the world—all narratives but its own, of course. Some have recognized this inherent inconsistency, as noted in [The Truth about the Truth](#), edited by Walter Anderson.

# Origin of critical race theory

In the mid-1970s, lawyers, activists and legal scholars across the country realized the heady advances of the civil rights era had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back. They sought new theories and strategies to combat the subtler forms of racism gaining ground.

Critical race theory became helpful for such things as illuminating particular ways white supremacy mutated from legalized *de jure* institutional racism—such as “separate but equal” laws—to *de facto* systemic racism lurking in housing, employment, education and elsewhere.

## Critical race theorists are not all the same

It is important to note: While every critical race theorist sees systemic racism as a problem to confront, not everyone who sees systemic racism as a problem to confront is a critical race theorist.

Likewise, critical race theorists are not monolithic, nor ideologically aligned in their approaches to ending racial injustice.

For example, after countless hours of listening to Derrick Bell—credited as a founder of critical race theory—one thing became clear to Vinay Harplani, a friend I met in college. Bell was inspired by a radical revolutionary, and it wasn't Karl Marx; it was Jesus Christ.

Bell's unique contribution to legal studies was the use of parables and stories to educate. In addition, Bell shared with Vinay how his faith and worldview were central to his activism. He likely would urge Christians to discover how theories seeking to understand and overcome racial injustice help us find paths we may have missed along the way.

# Critical theory and the Bible

Many Christians seem to believe Marxists have a monopoly on criticizing power structures. The Scriptures clearly offer a critical theory of the world that shines a light on oppression. Ecclesiastes 4:1 reads: “Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

*I saw the tears of the oppressed  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors.”*

Paul provides another early example of challenging an abuse of power in his public critique of Peter—an apostle—who refused to eat with Gentile Christians when Jewish Christians were present (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter’s actions delegitimized the Gentiles in the Jews’ eyes.

The oppression of the poor by the rich, the foreigner by the secure citizen, and the racial minority by the ethnic majority—all are particularly egregious to the Lord (Micah 6:10-13).

Yet, the problem of sin as described in the Bible is much worse than a power play of the elite over the poor. Christianity’s analysis of sin says the problem is within each of us (Romans 3:10-19).

There are legitimate criticisms of the story critical race theory tells, and legitimate concerns and critiques should be leveled against versions of human liberation that contradict the Bible. At the same time, the structural inequality and race-based oppression critical race theory decries are historical truths that are part of our nation’s past and present.

# Critical (g)race theory

Critical (g)race theory is what Paul does when he writes: “We have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5-6).

The same Paul who spoke of taking every thought captive quoted pagan scholars to support his understanding of the gospel. He applied common grace while at the same time being critical.

That is what we do in affirming the statement, “Black lives matter,” while critiquing racial nihilism and the rejection of absolute truth or moral order sometimes associated with it.

We proclaim the good news that God cares about injustice, and Jesus empowers us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before our God. That is how we avoid the perils of critical race theory while fulfilling the promise of our call to challenge the world.

*Rasool Berry is the teaching and online pastor for The Bridge Church in New York City. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*

*This article is adapted and republished by permission. The full article can be read in [Keeping the Faith: Reflections on Politics & Christianity in the Era of Trump & Beyond](#) available from [KTF Press](#).*