

Commentary: Critical theorists help us understand history

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In the [introduction to this series](#), I argued that we often think of critical race theory in the wrong ways. We think of it as a unit to be taken up or discarded as a whole. We view it monolithically, rather than seeing it as a complex field of study occupied by social scientists and historians who make contradictory claims.

Rather than talking about critical race theory as a unitary discipline, we instead will engage with and evaluate some claims by individual critical race theorists.

There are plenty of things to critique about critical race theorists' claims, and we'll get there. But first, let's see how critical race theorists can help us be more faithful Christians by helping us understand our own national history.

The racial history of American Christianity

Christian theology is not meant to be practiced by hermits independent of any society and history. We need to understand our situation to apply Scripture faithfully to it. Just as missionaries labor to understand their specific contexts and pastors get to know their people, so we all must understand the world around us to make a compelling and faithful witness to Christ.

The problem is, when it comes to American history, white Bible-believing Christians have not done well on the issue of race. Actually, in looking at

the history of racism in America, we have done terribly. Christians too often have been active participants in racism and have failed to reckon fully with the historical failings of predecessors we otherwise claim and cherish.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., [wrote to white clergy from the Birmingham, Ala., jail](#) that the biggest stumbling block to justice wasn't flagrant racists, but white Christians who didn't care enough to step up and help.

In essence, Christians have been accused of complicity in an unjust system. While that may be true in some cases, I think reality is far worse. Christians were not just silent in the face of injustice. Much of the racial injustice of American history was carried out by people who called themselves Christians. Worse than that, by people who claimed to make much of truth and care a lot about theology and fidelity to the Scriptures. What do we do with that?

Our national narrative

We can call it something like a troubling inconsistency. Or an unfortunate misstep. Or we could brush it aside and not talk about it. Downplaying is its own form of lying.

The Westminster Larger Catechism Question and Answer 145 defines lying, in part, as, “undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others.”

But some lie even more boldly and buy into the [lost cause narrative](#). In surveying historiography on race by people who call themselves Christians, these are the approaches you are likely to find.

Racism and all its heinous children—slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, redlining—are thought of as unpleasant footnotes on an otherwise idyllic society and heritage. We [lionize our heroes](#) and minimize their sins.

Here is where critical race theorists can help us, if we'll let them. They have no heroes whose reputations they feel compelled to protect. Many of them have taken stock of the racial sins of American Christians and paint a condemning picture. While that might make us feel badly, is it true?

Did early Christian settlers [practice and spread chattel slavery](#), or didn't they? Did pastors and theologians from [Whitefield to Dabney](#) come up with reasons to defend the institution of American slavery, or didn't they?

When political pressure mounted against slavery, did brand new, Bible-proclaiming [Presbyterian](#) and [Baptist](#) denominations form to protect the practice, or didn't they? Even a century later, during the civil rights movement, did the political muscle of conservative Christianity get behind it, or did Southern Baptists such as [Strom Thurmond](#) and [Jesse Helms](#) politically oppose it?

Perhaps the worst sin of white Christians was not complacency. It wasn't just that King did not have allies in the pews of white moderate churches, as he called them. He had all-out enemies, like Thurmond and Helms.

Critical race theorists have done good historical work in outlining the complacency, sins of omission, and outright racism of American Christians through the centuries. We ought to let them do it. It will help us understand the heritage of racial tension and ignorance we inherit. It will help us understand how we are perceived by the world. And it will help us decide what corrective actions need to be taken.

A proper use of critical race theory

You probably have heard an argument that goes like this: America needs to return to the values and practices of yesteryear in order to achieve our desired moral or political outcome. But getting this pill down requires us to ignore a number of incontrovertible facts.

Was America morally better in previous centuries? If so, who benefited? This is where Christian historians and critical race theorists suffer from opposite problems. Many Christian historians ignore facts in order to bolster our preferred narrative about the past. Critical race theorists thoroughly collect facts, but then run them through ideological prisms to project a vision of the future we must not support.

We must not buy into solutions that run counter to the word of God. But it would be irresponsible to ignore facts that do not fit our preconceived notions of our history. We should learn from critical race theorists who shed light on historical blind spots we have.

Many pieces on critical race theory by self-identified evangelicals or Reformed Christians will admit Christians can benefit from insights of critical race theory. But the conclusion of many such pieces is that critical race theory has foundational incompatibilities with Christianity and as such is too dangerous to read and study. If that's the conclusion, admissions of helpfulness amount to mere lip service. What one hand gives, the other takes away.

Our own historiography on issues of race is woefully lacking. Let's not turn away common-grace insights. The right way to evaluate a truth claim is not by asking whether the individual who makes it has been infected by critical race theory.

Once we establish the truth of historical claims, we come to an important question: "What do we do about it?" We will address this question in the third part of this series.

Ways you can pray:

1. Pray that God makes us receptive of truth, regardless of who is telling it.
2. Pray that God makes us humble enough to recognize facts we do not like.

3. Pray that God's people would care more about eradicating racism than defending ourselves from accusations of racism.

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