

Commentary: How should Christians engage critical race theory?

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A seminary professor recently told me the three most controversial letters in Evangelicalism are “CRT.” If you Google the acronym, you will find an overwhelming amount of information, much of it conflicting, about critical race theory.

How should Christians think about critical race theory? Is it a helpful influence, a fresh perspective, a poison pill or some mixture of them all?

This is the first in a four-part series on critical race theory, what commonly is referred to as CRT. My goal is not to give you an exhaustive exploration of critical race theory and its implications, but to set some guardrails.

What is critical race theory?

There are many definitions or summaries of critical race theory. Whenever possible, I find it helpful to let folks speak for themselves.

Critical race theory scholars Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain their field in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* as a “collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious.”

Notice: This description is more an approach to study than a statement of faith. That might drive some of us crazy, because we are used to detailed lists of affirmations and denials. I do not think such a definition of critical race theory is possible.

While there may be shared opinions between scholars, we need to be very careful not to paint with too broad a brush when summarizing such a complex field of study, saying things like, “Critical race theory teaches _____.”

Perhaps a scholar engaged in critical race theory makes a specific claim. That doesn't mean everyone in the field has reached the same conclusion. For this reason, when evaluating specific ideas, it is fairer to all involved to speak of the specific critical race theorist making the claim rather than assuming everyone else in the field shares the same opinions.

What should we do with it?

Critical race theory is complicated. Many have argued we need to reject critical race theory as a framework but should learn from its insights. My own denomination adopted [a resolution](#) making this point. While I think that's basically right, it's not quite that simple.

Some in this conversation take great pains to point out what they see as a foundational incompatibility between biblical Christianity and critical race theory. Others who disagree are more willing to see where critical race theory leads and evaluate whether certain conclusions are consistent with Christianity.

I fear too often this Christian conversation about critical race theory engages the issue at the wrong level. We talk about critical race theory as a complete unit, as if it's something we either need to accept or reject in total.

Even when we recognize we may use it in a limited capacity, we're still talking about how and when to use this unit of thought or tool called critical race theory. But I think there's a more helpful question: *How can I read critical race theory in a discerning and Christian manner?*

Avoiding pitfalls

If we are not careful, viewing critical race theory as an inflexible unit can reduce us to little more than language police. We will find ourselves unable to participate in public conversation or learn from people outside of our own bubbles, because others have different frames of reference or use different language.

Consider the following exchange between two Christian sisters:

Molly: *"I've really been confronted lately with my own white privilege."*

Sarah: *"You know, you shouldn't say that. That phrase has Marxist origins incompatible with Christianity."*

Sarah rightly wanted to guard her biblical worldview. But she engaged neither Molly nor her idea.

What did Molly mean by white privilege? Did she mean she believed herself personally culpable for all injustice ever committed by white people? Or did she mean she is realizing how little racism had mattered to her in years past? Sarah will never know. The conversation is over.

If this is our approach, we will dismiss true things said by critical theorists, because we judge too impulsively the individuals and their language to be ideologically impure.

I've written previously about how Christians should be [willing to learn](#) from folks outside our own theological tribes. Part of the reason for this is,

frankly, the American church's terrible track record on race and racism.

Conversations on racial justice began long before many white Christians were interested. We need help from people who have been working on the problem, even if we don't always like all the ways they're going about it or the words they're using.

This is just a brief introduction to set the stage for where we hope to go. This series will not be a masters-level study. The next article will explore some ways critical race theorists can help Christians. My prayer is we will be helped to be good conversation partners and discerning disciples of Jesus.

Ways you can pray:

1. The critical race theory discussion is not going away. Pray Christians would be discerning *and* loving in the ways we engage.
2. Pray Christians would guard the integrity of our faith, even from our own experiences, biases and blind spots.
3. Pray Christians would be humble enough to learn from non-Christians, recognizing God's common grace.

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