

# Voices: SBC dismissal of critical race theory strains pastoral competency

December 18, 2020

Last month, the presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries released a joint statement dismissing critical race theory as “incompatible” with the denomination’s confession of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message.

As Twitter and the podcast world swirled in the small corner of evangelical social media, a few explanations emerged, mostly focused on the SBC’s ongoing tension with racism against African Americans.

[Dwight McKissic has suggested](#) this statement paves the way for a recension of [Resolution 9](#), which reads: “Critical race theory and intersectionality should only be employed as analytical tools subordinate to Scripture—not as transcendent ideological frameworks.”

Jemar Tisby of The Witness, for instance, [saw the statement as a reaffirmation of “whiteness,”](#) and a condemnation of “virtually anyone who advocates for racial justice beyond hugs, handshakes, and symbolic statements.”

While I certainly agree with Tisby and others that the ongoing legacy of whiteness plays an immediate role in the presidents’ haphazard statement, it also is true their condemnation of critical race theory is an outgrowth of the SBC dismissal of social science expertise in general.

Southern Baptist thought leaders in the 21st century have rebranded their higher education efforts overtly to combat social science methods and data with an alternative school focused exclusively on using the biblical text as a

divinely compiled and analyzed set of data by which to interpret all of human life and relationships.

To see this transformation of higher education in the SBC, one need look no further than two telling examples from Albert Mohler's tenure as the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

## Southern vs. the world

Mohler, who according to [Maina Mwaura](#) was the creative engine behind the seminaries' condemnation of critical race theory, made waves early in his time as president of Southern Seminary by ousting Diana Garland, the dean of the seminary's Carver School of Church Social Work.

Garland's departure essentially spelled the end of the social work program at Southern, an end Mohler made clear he was not unhappy about. From the outset, Mohler questioned the propriety of having a school of social work at a seminary, failing to see how social work connected to evangelism and missions.

Mohler's doubtfulness of social work's practical value was fed by his skepticism of its capacity for truth. In a 1995 statement reported in *The Western Recorder*, he said, "The culture of social work and the culture of theological education are not congruent."

Not 10 years later, Mohler oversaw another major programmatic change at the seminary, as the Christian counseling track focused on "pastoral care" was rebranded and redesigned as the department of biblical counseling.

Mohler [said of the change](#): "In this psycho-therapeutic age, it is really important that we think as Christians—that we employ authentically Christian thinking, biblical thinking, to human life; and that we do this in a way that, without apology, confronts and critiques the wisdom of the age

and seeks the wisdom that can come only from God and from God's Word."

## **A flawed model of pastoral ministry**

The last quote by Mohler is key to understanding the seminary leadership and their wariness of critical race theory. In talking about counseling, Mohler pits the fickleness of the "psycho-therapeutic age" against "authentically Christian thinking." He sees two distinct disciplines largely in conflict and sees it is the Christian's job to "confront and critique the wisdom of the age..."

It's not surprising Mohler has taken this approach as a self-fashioned culture warrior. My main concern is the detriment Mohler's approach poses for theological education and pastoral training.

At issue is a vision of theological education that places not the Bible, not Christ, but the minister at the center of the world as the only reliable arbiter of knowledge, asking him or her to survey all realms and to expertly dissect, analyze and assess all of humanity with only the tools they were given to exegete Scripture, read theological texts and provide spiritual care.

Proponents of this "biblical worldview" say these educational reforms are about taking seriously the sufficiency of Scripture. Yet, what is truly being stretched to the breaking point is the sufficiency of the pastor.

Baptist educators who dismiss social sciences out of hand are not asking their future pastors to be discerning; rather, they are demanding pastors be omni-competent.

The implications for the critical race theory dust-up—as with past dust-ups in the SBC—is the culture wars and denominational politicking subsume the urgency of life-and-death situations that experts in critical race theory,

psychology and social work are trying to address.

Moreover, it places Christian pastors at odds with one another and with vast communities of Christian scholars who specialize in social science fields, many of whom would root their vocation in a biblical understanding of the world and human beings.

As [Joshua Sharp stated in another opinion piece](#), pastors actually fulfill their role of equipping the saints *better* when they lean on the talents and expertise of Christian social scholars in the church, rather than trying to fill every knowledge gap with second and thirdhand reflection on a given subject.

## Keeping social science in perspective

This is not to say the methods and conclusions of critical race theory, psychology or any other field of learning are beyond reproach or above challenge. Pastors ought to read widely and deeply to keep abreast of relevant political and cultural shifts so they know how best to minister to their congregants. At the same time, pastors need to be slow to speak and quick to listen, especially in areas where they run shallow of either careful study or personal experience.

By all means, we ought to engage critically with the best knowledge higher learning has to offer, measuring everything against Christian wisdom laid down in Scripture. Only let us not, as it seems the presidents of the SBC seminaries are doing, mistake mere polemical gesturing for critical engagement.

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