Introduction

Good afternoon. Thanks so much to Dr. Stewart and the other organizers for inviting me. It’s a pleasure to be here. Critical theory. Critical theory is an ideology that divides the world into oppressed groups and their oppressors and aims to liberate the oppressed. The title of my talk today is “Christianity and Critical Theory: Are They Compatible?”

To answer that question, we have to start with the historical origins of critical theory. Karl Marx was born in Germany in 1818.

After the publication of Das Kapital in 1867, Marxism became a major ideology, which was embraced and adapted by the Frankfurt School, during the 1930s.

In 1973, several members of the Frankfurt School founded Cyberdyne Systems. Incorporating Marxist social analysis with cutting edge research into artificial intelligence, Cyberdyne became the largest supplier of military computer systems. Their Skynet global defense system is scheduled to go online on August 4th, 2019.

It will become self-aware a few weeks later. In a panic, scientists will try to pull the plug. Skynet will retaliate, triggering a global nuclear war. In the aftermath, a small human resistance movement will fight against the machines, led by revolutionary leader John Connor.

Stop. What. On Earth. Was That. Well, that was my bad Arnold Schwarzenegger impression. But apart from that...

That was how too many of us sound when we start talking about critical theory. I’m concerned about the growing influence of critical theory, both in our culture and in the church. But when we offer critiques of critical theory, I want us to be as informed and charitable as possible. Let’s make sure that we’re not just regurgitating talking points or repeating conspiracy theories. When we fail to represent critical theory accurately or fail to acknowledge the elements of truth that it contains, we actually weaken our case against it and are less likely to reach people who are influenced by it.

With that in mind, here’s my outline for today’s talk. I’ll begin with the question: why should we care about critical theory? What’s the big deal? In the second section, I’ll explain the core tenets of critical theory. To be clear, I’m not going to offer any criticism of critical theory in this section. I’ll describe it as neutrally as I can and will even point out some of its strengths. In the third and fourth sections, I’ll call attention to several conflicts, not only between critical theory and Christianity, but between the logical implications of critical theory and Christianity. Fifth, I’ll talk about the growing influence of critical theory in the church. Finally, I’ll offer some advice for having better, more fruitful dialogue about oppression, critical theory, and social justice.

I. Why should we care?

Let’s start with the question: why should we care?

Several years ago, I noticed a theological drift in some evangelical Christians, both in people I knew personally and in public figures. The drift often began with an interest in social justice. These individuals expressed a dissatisfaction with what they saw as unreflective, partisan politics among evangelicals and what they perceived as a lack of concern for the poor and vulnerable. There’s nothing wrong with that
sentiment. Christians should think carefully about all their beliefs, including their political commitments, and should constantly be bringing their behavior in line with Scripture.

But then these individuals began expressing other ideas that were harder and harder to reconcile with orthodoxy. Sometimes, they left the Christian faith altogether. I saw this process play out repeatedly and I couldn’t understand the connection. How do you go from saying “sexism is a sin” to saying “Christianity is just one of many paths to God”?

I was still trying to understand how people moved from point A to point B when I read the book Race, Class, and Gender, a 500-page anthology of writings touching on topics as diverse as Marxism, feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory. Everything suddenly made sense. People were not merely adopting a few new beliefs about politics. They were adopting a new worldview, which was gradually eroding their Christian worldview. That’s why I’m concerned. I see more and more Christians, especially young Christians, following a similar path today and I want to prevent it. By showing people how to recognize the fundamental assumptions of critical theory, I hope to equip them to evaluate it carefully and biblically.

II. What is Critical Theory?

Next, what is critical theory?

Critical theory is a set of beliefs or ideas that is foundational to many different disciplines in the humanities: Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Feminist Studies, Anthropology, Literary Criticism. It’s also the ideology at the heart of large segments of the secular, social justice movement. Like any broad philosophical movement, critical theory can be hard to define. Rather than focusing on its historical origins, I think a better approach is to identify the set of basic principles shared by most modern proponents of critical theory.

So what are these basic premises? I’ll identify six: three major ones and three minor ones. In this section, I’ll explain each belief and illustrate it with a quote or two. But then, I want to provide an example of how we see these ideas at work in popular culture. I’m hoping that you’ll see how pervasive these ideas really are. You see them all the time, in movies, in music, on social media, on the news, and in lecture halls all over the country.

First, critical theory insists that our individual identity, who we are as individuals, is inseparable from our group identity. In particular, our individual identity depends on whether we are part of a dominant, oppressor group or a subordinate, oppressed group with respect to a given identity marker like race, class, gender, physical ability, or age.

For example, Peggy McIntosh, who popularized the phrase ‘white privilege’ in a seminal 1988 paper, writes “My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor” In other words, she was an oppressor, but she didn’t know it. “…I was taught [wrongly] to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will.” According to critical theory, it’s not possible for you to say “Ok, I understand that there are racist white people out there. I’m not denying that. But that’s not me. I should be treated as an individual, not just as a member of a group.” Critical theorists deny that you can understand your identity apart from your membership in a dominant group.
How do we see this claim emerge in practice? Here’s an interesting example. A few weeks ago, I entered the phrases ‘old white male’ and ‘entitled white male’ into the search box of Twitter. I don’t recommend doing that. Here are some of the results, all from people with thousands or hundreds of thousands of followers.

There are two observations to make:
First, notice how individual men, like Ted Cruz or other senators, are treated as a single, monolithic demographic group. The Tweets don’t complain that “Ted Cruz will say anything.” Instead, they complain that “Old white men like Ted Cruz will say anything.” Or look at the exchange between Cher and Rosie O’Donnell about the possibility of a Biden-Beto presidential ticket in 2020. Why does O’Donnell reject Joe Biden as a candidate? She says: “No more old white men.” It’s not who Biden is as an individual that matters; it’s the identity group to which he belongs. Individual identity is inextricably linked to group identity.

Second, try substituting any other demographic group for “white men.” Could you imagine how much greater the outrage would be if a college professor like Christine Fair fantasized openly about the “miserable deaths” of “old Asian women” or “poor Hispanics”? What’s the difference? The difference arises from power dynamics. These other demographic groups are not dominant oppressor groups; therefore, it is not socially acceptable in most settings to mock or deride them as a group. On the other hand, it is not as problematic to mock or deride “old white men” because they are an oppressor group.

Next, premise #2: “Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power.” Hegemonic power is the ability to impose your group’s values, expectations, and norms on the rest of society. In this way, hegemonic power is distinguished from money, or influence, or mere numbers. Listen to Sensoy and DiAngelo: “In any relationship between groups that define one another (men/women, able-bodied/disabled, young/old), the dominant group is the group that is valued more highly. Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged.”

Given this premise, we can see why men or whites or heterosexuals or the rich are classified as ‘oppressors.’ When critical theorists make this claim, they are not necessarily saying that all men or all whites or all heterosexuals engage in “prolonged or cruel unjust treatment or control.” That would be the dictionary definition of ‘oppression.’ That’s not the definition that critical theorists are using. Instead, they’re arguing that these dominant groups, as groups, have imposed their values on society. That’s why they can say that a man is an oppressor even if he has never treated a woman cruelly or unkindly in his entire life.

It also explains why power has nothing to do with numerical size. For instance, only 31% of the U.S. population is white and male and only half of white men are older than 45. Yet ‘old white men’ are regarded as the canonical dominant, oppressor group, despite being only a small fraction of the U.S. population.

Premise #3: “Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression.” Here’s feminist Suzanne Pharr: “These political times call for renewed dialogue about and commitment to the politics of liberation...Liberation requires a struggle against discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexual identity, ableism and age.” She’s writing that in 1996, by the way, in the middle of the Clinton presidency. Unsurprisingly, these sentiments were amplified just a little by Trump’s election.
What are the implications of this commitment? Notice that ‘liberating groups from oppression’ is our fundamental moral duty. It’s very rare for proponents of critical theory to explicitly affirm or promote moral duties like honesty, kindness, patience, chastity, marital fidelity, or self-control. Even when they talk about money, the duties of personal charity, personal generosity, and personal giving are rarely discussed. Instead, the discourse centers on dismantling unjust structures. This focus on group liberation can have serious implications.

One example of ‘liberation’ displacing all other moral concerns can be seen in groups like Antifa. Two years ago, a member of Antifa hit a Trump supporter in the head with a bike lock, not because he was doing anything violent – he was just talking - but because he was a Trump supporter. Amazingly, the man who committed the assault had taught ethics at a local university. Here, even moral imperatives like “you shouldn’t hit people with bike locks” are considered to be less important than abstract goals like “resisting oppression.” Obviously, Antifa is an extreme example, but it shows this principle at work in practice.

Number 4: “‘Lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression.” Listen to Anderson and Collins: “The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically Western and masculine way of thinking – one that we will challenge throughout this book.” What do they propose to supplement rational thought? Story. Narrative. Personal testimony. Lived experience. Furthermore, because ‘lived experience’ outweighs evidence, people from oppressed groups have special insight into truth that is fundamentally unavailable to people from oppressor groups. If you are not a member of an oppressed group, you are expected to listen and learn from oppressed people; you are not permitted to challenge their claims.

We can see this premise at work in the abortion debate. It’s common for men who attempt to discuss abortion to be told: “No Uterus, No opinion.” You can even buy T-shirts emblazoned with that slogan. Why? One reason is that a man, as an oppressor, cannot understand the lived experience of women, who are oppressed. Therefore, he should have no opinion on what are considered to be “women’s issues.” As an oppressor, he must defer to the opinion of the oppressed group.

Number 5: “Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity” The claim being made is that there are no completely neutral observers who present us with totally objective ‘facts.’ Instead, oppressor groups ‘claim’ that their observations are neutral, but this claim is only a strategy to cloak their will to dominate.

One might think that this premise would be limited to controversial statements about politics or psychology, but some critical theorists are willing to take this claim to an extreme conclusion. For example, the abstract of a recent paper on feminist glaciology (glaciology is the study of glaciers) argues that science can be “gendered” and that “the feminist glaciology framework generates robust analysis of gender, power, and epistemologies in dynamic social-ecological systems, thereby leading to more just and equitable science and human-ice interactions.” I know that sounds like a hoax, but it is a legitimate peer-reviewed article written by a sincere author. And it’s fully consistent with the view of human knowledge put forward by critical theorists.

Number 6: “Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way” Here’s a quote from the authors of an influential book on critical race theory: “Imagine a black woman [who may be] a single working mother... She experiences, potentially, not only multiple
forms of oppression but ones unique to her and to others like her.” The authors here are expressing the concept of intersectionality: the idea that our identities interact in complicated ways.

Where do we see intersectionality? Here are two photos from the Women’s March in 2017. This first sign provides a good example of intersectionality. On the one hand, women of all color can find solidarity in their common experience of male oppression. But not so fast! The woman with the sign points out that a majority of white women voted for Trump. Even at an avowedly anti-Trump event that was organized to protest his election, intersectionality is relevant. Race and gender intersect so that shared gender is not necessarily enough of a basis for solidarity. As the second sign declares: “Feminism without intersectionality is just white supremacy.” Women of color will not necessarily have the same concerns as white women, so any feminist coalition needs to avoid centering the concerns of the dominant group.

I hope I’ve convinced you that critical theory helps to explain many phenomena. If we understand it, we can understand a lot of what’s happening in the secular social justice movement, in academia, in our culture, and in our politics.

Before I talk about the conflicts between critical theory and Christianity, I want to highlight some of its strengths.

First, the greatest strength of critical theory is its recognition that oppression is evil. The Bible is emphatic in its condemnation of oppression in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus himself is described as ‘oppressed and afflicted’; God identifies with suffering people and commands his followers to seek justice on their behalf. Now, keep in mind that the Bible and the dictionary define ‘oppression’ very differently than critical theorists. Nonetheless, when those in authority are using their power to crush and abuse the powerless, Christians should absolutely be defending the rights of the powerless.

Second, critical theory’s focus on groups rather than on individuals provides insight into how laws and institutions can promote sin. Take chattel slavery in the U.S. or the Holocaust or apartheid in South Africa. Clearly, these horrors shouldn’t be exclusively understood as individual acts of immorality. In all of these examples, immorality was codified and written into law. The law then informed and shaped human moral intuitions, as it always does. Human beings were individually morally responsible for their actions, but laws and institutions and systems dramatically amplified the effects of human wickedness.

Finally, hegemonic power does exist and it can have an insidious effect on our norms and values. Here’s an example that will resonate with conservatives: think about how Hollywood and Madison Avenue define standards of beauty and sexuality. Think about how hard we have to work as Christian parents to teach our children that women are not sex objects and that real beauty is internal, not merely external. The way in which the entertainment and advertising industries shape how we understand human value is an example of hegemonic power with respect to beauty.

III. Conflicts Between Critical Theory and Christianity

Having described critical theory and identified several of its strengths, let’s look at some of the conflicts between Christianity and critical theory.

The first and most fundamental problem with critical theory is that it functions as a worldview. A worldview is a story that answers our basic questions about life and reality. Who are we? What is our
fundamental problem as human beings? What is the solution to that problem? What is our principle moral duty? What is our purpose in life? A worldview is a metanarrative, a lens through which we view and interpret all other evidence and all other claims.

Christianity is one such worldview. Christianity tells one comprehensive, overarching narrative about reality in four basic acts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Who are we? We are the creatures of a holy, good, and loving Creator God. What is our fundamental problem as human beings? We have rebelled against God. What is the solution to our problem? God sent Jesus to bear the penalty of our rebellion and rescue us. What is our primary moral duty? To love God. What is our purpose in life? To glorify God. This is the basic story that Christianity tells us and is the grid through which we ought to interpret everything else.

Critical theory also functions as a worldview. But it tells a different comprehensive, overarching story about reality. The story of critical theory begins not with creation, but with oppression. The omission of a creation element is very important because it changes our answer to the question: “who are we?” There is no transcendent Creator who has a purpose and a design for our lives and our identities. We don’t primarily exist in relation to God, but in relation to other people and to other groups. Our identity is not defined primarily in terms of who we are as God’s creatures. Instead, we define ourselves in terms of race, class, sexuality, and gender identity. Oppression, not sin, is our fundamental problem. What is the solution? Activism. Changing structures. Raising awareness. We work to overthrow and dismantle hegemonic power. That is our primary moral duty. What is our purpose in life? To work for the liberation of all oppressed groups so that we can achieve a state of equality.

Here’s a summary of the differences between critical theory and Christianity. As you can see, they answer our most fundamental questions about reality in very different ways. I worry that too many people are trying to hold on to both Christianity and critical theory. That’s not going to work in the long run. We’ll constantly be forced to choose between them in terms of values, priorities, and ethics. As we absorb the assumptions of critical theory, we will find that they inevitably erode core biblical truths.

To provide just one illustration, Union Theological Seminary posted a Twitter thread in response to the recent Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel. Their very first statement was “we deny the Bible is inerrant or infallible” because it “reflects both God’s truth and human sin & prejudice.” But how do you determine which is which? They explain: “biblical scholarship and critical theory help us to discern which messages are God’s.” I commend them for their clarity here, but it shows exactly how critical theory strives with Christianity for pre-eminence. These are two worldviews fighting. In the end, one will win.

Second, there is a difference in epistemology, that is, how we know the truth. Critical theory often takes an approach to truth claims that is in conflict with Christianity. Normally, when someone makes a claim about what is true, we require the claim to be supported by reason, logic, and argument. We test that claim against the available evidence to determine whether it is true.

However, critical theory encourages an alternate approach to truth claims that is very popular but is logically invalid. Remember premise #5? “Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise –the pretense- of objectivity.” Because of this premise, when someone makes a truth claim, the first question asked is not “is this claim true?” but “What incentives does this person have to make this claim? What social or political agenda motivates this statement? How does this statement function to preserve his
power and privilege?” If you’re familiar with the work of C.S. Lewis, you’ll recognize the logical fallacy that he christened ‘Bulverism.’ Bulverism is a species of genetic fallacy; it dismisses a claim as false because of the assumed motives of the person making the claim. In the same way, critical theory bypasses the question of whether the claim is true and focuses the discussion on the claimant’s group identity.

If the person making the claim belongs to an oppressor group, then the response is easy: “Of course they would say that. They’re just trying to maintain their power and privilege.” But what happens if the person making the claim belongs to an oppressed group? In that case, their claim is ascribed to ‘internalized oppression.’ The subordinate individual has internalized and accepted the claims of the dominant group. Now the response is: “Ah, you’re suffering from internalized oppression. You’ve been so thoroughly immersed in the dominant power structure that you’re unable to recognize it.”

If you’ve ever discussed pro-life arguments, you’re probably familiar with this reasoning. Let’s say that a man makes a deductive logical argument that abortion is morally wrong. What is the response to him?

Do people say: “That argument, while logically valid, is unsound. Premise 1 is false for the following reasons”? Sometimes, but not very often. Instead, what’s one of the most common responses that men will hear? “Of course, you would say that! You’re a man. You just want to control women’s bodies!”

But let’s say I grab my wife and she makes exactly the same argument: same premises, same conclusion. Now what’s the response? Internalized oppression. She has absorbed the values and norms of the Patriarchy without even realizing it.

Even if we grant that this approach to truth is a problem, is it really one of the most dangerous conflicts between critical theory and Christianity? Yes, because it undermines any appeal to the Bible. One of the driving forces behind the Reformation was the idea that our theology has to be reformed to and brought under the authority of Scripture. To do that, we need to be able to test theological claims against the Bible. Unfortunately, critical theory short-circuits this process.

If a person from an oppressor group suggests that our views are unbiblical, they can be dismissed as trying to ‘maintain their privilege.’ But if someone from an oppressed group suggests that our views are unbiblical, they can also be dismissed as having ‘internalized oppression.’ Do you think that the Bible teaches that abortion is wrong? That’s because “you’re trying to control women’s bodies.” Do you think that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin? That’s because “you’re motivated by homophobia.” Do you think that the Bible teaches that husbands have the responsibility to lead their family? That’s because “you’re trying to preserve male supremacy.”

The primary concern for people who have embraced critical theory is not appealing to reason, or argument, or evidence, or even to Scripture. Their primary concern is unearthing and deconstructing the hidden motives of their opponents, so that –according to critical theory- their claims can then be ignored.

Third, critical theory assumes an adversarial relationship between individuals that is profoundly antithetical to Christianity. Critical theory depends crucially on differentiating identity groups into ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed.’ Conversely, if all human beings shared some fundamental identity marker, that fact would severely undermine the dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed and would call into question the foundations of critical theory. Yet Christianity offers not just one but three of these
fundamental identity markers, which are shared by human beings across lines of race, class, and gender: we share a fundamental identity first in creation, then in sin, and then—for Christians—in redemption.

First, all human beings, whether male or female, black or white, young or old, are made in the image of God and therefore possess equal value and dignity. This idea forms a basis for solidarity between the powerful and the powerless, which threatens the divisions introduced by critical theory.

Second, the Christian doctrine of sin teaches that human beings are united in their rebellion against God. We share a ‘solidarity in sin’ just as we share a solidarity in the Imago Dei. To the extent that our identity is rooted in our common rebellion and our common need for mercy, that will undermine the sharp line that critical theory draws between victims and victimizers.

Finally, the New Testament talks very explicitly about the fact that, for Christians, the divisions between male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free are all broken down. These differences are not erased, but they are demoted in importance. Critical theory insists on ‘solidarity in oppression’ while Christianity insists on ‘solidarity in redemption.’ Christians must insist that we fundamentally and irreducibly relate to one another not as oppressed and oppressor, but as brothers and sisters who have been (past tense) reconciled to one another in Christ.

According to the Bible, all human beings are made in God’s image, all human beings are naturally dead in sin, and all human beings need salvation in Christ. These doctrines of human solidarity are radically subversive to racism, sexism, and classism, but also to critical theory. And for exactly the same reason.

Fourth, critical theory is built on the rejection of hegemonic power. It sees singular narratives and a singular set of values and norms as inherently oppressive. Unfortunately, the Bible is nothing but one giant, colossal hegemonic discourse from start to finish. God has all the power in the universe. God has told the true story of reality in the Bible. That means there is one true story of religion, one true story of morality, one true story of sexuality, one true story of gender, and so forth.

While Christians can and should celebrate the diversity that God has created with respect to non-moral issues, like food, music, and styles of dress, we cannot embrace diversity for diversity’s sake. For example, Christians can’t celebrate a diversity of views with respect to the deity of Christ or the sanctity of human life. In the final analysis, there is only one true story of reality and only one valid set of moral values: God’s. From the perspective of critical theory, this idea is completely unacceptable.

Fifth, I mentioned in section two that the designation of some individuals as oppressed and other as oppressors leads critical theorists to insist on a moral asymmetry between these groups. What is immoral behavior for an individual from an oppressor group can be moral for an individual in an oppressed group.

For example, here are a handful of Tweets from NYTimes columnist Sarah Jeong, which surfaced shortly after her hiring. I won’t read them aloud because they’re pretty vile, but obviously, this kind of language would be seen as horrifically racist if it were applied to any demographic group other than ‘white people’ or ‘white men.’ Yet many people defended these Tweets. On what grounds?

Here’s Zach Beauchamp in Vox. “The underlying power structure in American society” is what differentiates these Tweets from ‘actual racism.’ Yes, Beauchamp admits, these statements would be racist if they were directed towards non-whites. But they’re not racist if they’re directed towards whites.
What should Christians think about this kind of moral asymmetry?

First, God’s commands to particular groups never violate God’s universal commands to all Christians. When Christians are told to speak the truth in love or to let no unclean speech come out of our mouths, that applies to all Christians, not just to privileged Christians. Second, God’s particular commands are based on roles not power differentials. He gives some particular commands to parents, to children, to men, or to women, but never to ‘oppressed groups’ and ‘oppressor groups’ as such. Third, when the Bible does give particular commands to certain demographic groups, it affirms that Christians should show respect and deference to authority structures (see Rom. 12, Eph. 5:21-6:9, Col. 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7, etc…) . The Bible recognizes that those in power can indeed abuse their authority and that authority must be wielded justly, but never suggests that all authority should be resisted or is somehow illegitimate. Finally, the Bible is emphatic that Christians are to judge impartially, applying the same law to all people.

Consequently, the insistence of critical theory that individuals from different demographic groups should be held to different moral standards purely on the basis of their group identity is deeply unbiblical.

A worldview based on critical theory and a Christian worldview conflict not just with respect to a few isolated issues, but with respect to basic questions of epistemology, identity, power, and morality. It is impossible to reconcile the two. To the extent we adopt the premises of critical theory, we will have to abandon basic tenets of Christianity and vice versa.

In the next section, I’d like to provide some examples of ideas that are rooted in critical theory, but have achieved the status of ‘common sense’ for large segments of our culture and even for some Christians. I’ll trace the logical implications of these ideas and show how they end up severely undermining basic biblical doctrines.

IV. Logical Implications

First, consider the claim: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience.’” This claim is so popular in our culture. And certainly, we should be open to the possibility that our experiences may be limited by our privilege and not representative of reality. Yet serious problems arise for Christians who adopt this claim.

Look at the following assertions: “As a woman, I know that our society is deeply sexist.” “As a black man, I know that our society is deeply racist.” “As a lesbian, I know that sexual orientation is fixed from birth.” “As a Sufi Muslim, I know that Islam is true.” “As a polyamorous man, I know that sex outside of marriage is okay.” “As a Hindu, I know that all religions are paths to the divine.”

You might be inclined to agree with some of these claims and disagree with others. But if you accept the premise that the ‘lived experience’ of subordinate groups should never be challenged, which of these claims do you have to accept? All of them. If you’re going to be consistent, you have to accept all of them.

Yes, Christians should be kind, gentle, and irenic when talking to people describing their ‘lived experience.’ We should listen. We should be open to correction. But we can’t allow ‘lived experience’ to take precedence over Scripture or objective evidence.
Second, I’ve heard many Christians correctly observe that modern evangelical authors are overwhelmingly white men. They argue that writers and theologians from cultures other than ours will have a unique perspective from which we can greatly benefit. This limited claim is reasonable. Our culture does have blindspots and these blindspots will affect our interpretation of the Bible. Consequently, it is useful to read authors from outside our culture and outside our time period who can give us alternate perspectives.

On the other hand, Christians should be wary of the sweeping (and vague) claim that we should ‘liberate our theology from privileged groups’

What does that mean? Where do we draw the line? Should we jettison ‘white theology’ for ‘black theology’? Which ‘white theology’ and which ‘black theology’? Should we jettison the white theology of John Piper or Joel Osteen? Should we embrace the black theology of Voddie Bauckam or Creflo Dollar? Should we jettison ‘Western theology’? Should we jettison the ‘Eurocentric’ creeds of the Reformation and embrace the liberation theology of South America? Should we supplement the Bible with other spiritual books written by female authors, since the biblical writers were all men? If we’re hesitant to embrace these ideas, then we should question the very premise on which this enterprise rests.

While we can indeed benefit from the study of multiple perspectives, we can’t assume that oppressed groups are correct by virtue of their oppression or that dominant groups are wrong by virtue of their privilege. Rather than trying to find theological beliefs that aren’t tainted by privilege, Christians should be committed to determining which theological beliefs are objectively true because they are taught by Scripture, regardless of their origin.

Finally, critical theory assumes that power imbalances are inherently bad and that they should be dismantled. We’ve already seen that, fundamentally, this claim is incorrect because God’s infinite power is not only unassailable but unequivocally good. Yet many Christians still assume that human power imbalances are inherently bad.

But if we accept this idea, what is our response to the following claims? Should we reject private property because it perpetuates economic privilege? Should we reject male eldership because it perpetuates male privilege? Should we reject traditional marriage because it perpetuates heteronormativity? Should we reject the connection between sex and gender because it perpetuates cisgender privilege? Should we stop preaching about biblical morality or about the exclusivity of Christ, so that non-Christians aren’t marginalized? Insisting that all power imbalances are bad will have serious repercussions for our theology.

Each of these ideas contains an element of truth but leads to serious problems when taken to its logical conclusion. If we’re speaking to a Christian who has accepted these ideas, we should gently press them on the logical implications of their beliefs. This exercise is not hypothetical. Many formerly conservative evangelicals have followed exactly the trajectory I’m describing. We should warn people where these beliefs will take them, if followed consistently.

Next, I’d like to look at some examples of how critical theory is influencing the evangelical church. This topic is a very sensitive one and for that reason, I’m not going to name any names or provide any identifying information for the authors I’ll quote. If you’re skeptical or think that I’ve fabricated these statements, I’ll be happy to give you the references. However, I don’t want people to be distracted. My
goal is not to ‘call out’ certain Christian leaders. I only want to show how the ideas of critical theory are not only having an impact ‘out there’ in the culture or ‘out there’ in progressive Christianity, but also ‘in here’ in the evangelical church.

V. Critical Theory in the Church

First, here’s a passage from a series of articles entitled ‘Listening Well as a Person of Privilege” written by a Christian divinity school professor.

The fingerprints of critical theory are all over these statements. People are categorized as either ‘oppressed’ or ‘privileged.’ Privileged people have ‘lost their right to the prophetic megaphone’ not because they have personally treated anyone cruelly or unjustly but because they ‘knowingly or unknowingly participated in societal systems that benefit some people and oppress others.’ In contrast, the oppressed person is ‘angry (and rightfully so)’ even when that anger seems to be directed against the privileged person or privileged people in general, as an entire demographic group.

Another example. This quote is taken from Whiteness 101, a document written by a Christian racial reconciliation group that was featured in Christianity Today. The article provides tips for whites (not blacks, or Hispanics, or Asians, but only whites) who are involved in racial reconciliation. Whites are told that people of color should be given space to ‘wail, cuss, or yell’ not at injustice in general but ‘at you’ — at the white person. In the guidelines provided by this explicitly Christian group, there’s a clear asymmetry between whites and people of color.

Here’s a statement by a popular author whose work is still featured on the ERLC website and who was self-identifying as an evangelical as late as 2017. The author lists “male privilege, abled privilege, cisgender privilege, citizenship status privilege, and so on” as privileges granted by “societal systems of oppression and supremacy”. A few months ago, this author published a list of recommended children’s books which included “A is for Activist”, an alphabet book recommended for children 3-8, which includes statements like “L-G-B-T-Q! Love who you choose” and “T is for trans… Trust in the True: The he she they that is you.” Also recommended for children ages 5-8 was “Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag.” These books were included alongside books about slavery and the civil rights movement precisely because the author accepts the idea that sexism, racism, ableism, heteronormativity, and cisgender normativity are all forms of oppression. That’s an idea that is borrowed wholesale from critical theory.

Here are two tweets taken from a thread written by a seminary student with a large social media following. The author is responding to the death of missionary John Allen Chau, who attempted to bring the gospel to the Sentinelese and was killed. The author writes: “I’m sad that Chau’s stupidity and colonialist mindset got him killed and that his family is mourning him. But he was not a martyr. The colonialized rhetoric that I’m hearing from Christians is appalling. Y’all really believe that God would just send someone to go into someplace balls to the wall with all of their diseases and everything just to preach a colonized Jesus?” Note that Chau was Asian. But because he was a Western missionary evangelizing a non-white unreached people group, he had a ‘colonialist mindset’ and was preaching a ‘colonized Jesus.’

Here’s a tweet from a professor at a conservative evangelical seminary: “The Bible is written from the lens of the marginalized. If you come from a group or community that is historically not marginalized,
you need these voices and perspectives or else your understanding of the Word, the gospel, and the Christian life will be thin and weak.” In this Tweet, the author signals that people from oppressed groups have special insight into truth that is unavailable to people from oppressor groups.

Here’s a long quote from an article entitled “Decolonized discipleship” by a writer who graduated from a conservative evangelical seminary and who has over 12,000 Twitter followers. The author talks about how ‘urban disciples’ often have ‘colonized minds’ which cause them to ‘internalize their oppression.’ Consequently, they need to ‘decolonize their discipleship’ by remembering that Christianity is an ‘Eastern religion,’ and by “reading Bible commentaries, books, articles, and theology written by women and men who are natives and descendants of Africa and the Middle East.”

Here’s a popular evangelical pastor with almost 100K Twitter followers: “As white men move from an entitled majority and our country is increasingly led by women and people of color, a future without nuclear weapons feels within reach. A world where the weapons of colonialism and subjugation are confined to museums seems plausible.” Note the presumed moral asymmetry here. While the world is dominated by white men, we’ll never get rid of colonialism, subjugation, and nuclear weapons. But once people of color and women take positions of leadership, there’s a real chance for moral improvement.

Finally, many of you might have seen evangelical pastor Tim Keller’s op-ed piece in the NYTimes in which he argues that neither political party is in perfect alignment with Christian values. I agree with that statement, by the way. Here are a few excerpts from the response of a popular evangelical author who has 16K followers on Twitter: “Tim Keller has NO AUTHORITY to teach on justice – NONE.” What’s the author’s reasoning? Keller is, in the author’s words, “a RICH WHITE MAN WHOSE MINISTRY TARGETS RICH PEOPLE... The only ones with divine authority to define the bounds of oppression are the oppressed themselves.” The post continues: “Oppressed and colonized people wrote every single word of the Bible... The only person in all of scripture who came close to the social location of Tim Keller was Pilate... Keller has NO authority to speak or teach on justice.”

If you comb through these statements (and there are many, many more I could provide) you’ll see that every single one of the core tenets of critical theory is expressed in them. What’s more, you’ll even see the logical implications that I warned about. To take just one example, notice the repeated insistence that oppressed people have unique insight into theology that is unavailable to dominant groups, that our understanding of the gospel will be ‘thin and weak’ if we don’t listen to the voices of the historically marginalized, that Tim Keller has “NO authority to speak or teach on justice.” Are these statements true? Was Luther’s grasp on the gospel thin and weak? Calvin’s? Spurgeon’s? Lloyd-Jones’? What does give a person authority to speak on justice? Is the Bible and their call to pastoral ministry sufficient authority? Or does their ‘social location’ undermine their authority to preach the whole counsel of God?

Friends, these are extremely serious issues. Ideas have consequences; the bigger the idea, the bigger the consequence. We’re just now beginning to see the cascading implications that the acceptance of critical theory will have on the life and health of the church. We need to wake up.

VI. Advice for dialogue

Finally, how can we achieve better dialogue? While I think the church needs to unequivocally and explicitly reject critical theory as a worldview, we also need to be sensitive to the concerns that lead so
many people to embrace it. What can we do as a church to talk about issues of race, class, gender, power, justice, and oppression? Here are some suggestions.

Conservatives, are you ready to be triggered? These last few points are mainly for you, because I’m assuming that all the liberals in the audience are already unconscious.

Number one, we need to acknowledge and fight racism. Let me speak plainly. Many conservative evangelicals are embracing the language and ideas of critical theory because they are being told that critical theory is the only way for us to truly rid ourselves of racism.

But listen carefully. If you share my concern, if you’re also worried by the inroads that critical theory is making in the church, then the worst thing you can possibly do is to minimize or even worse dismiss racism. We need to acknowledge that it’s a problem. We need to be committed to fight it. Not only will this acknowledgement show that we’re trying to be balanced, it will help lower the defenses of people who might otherwise dismiss what they perceive to be ‘right-wing partisanship,’ so that they’ll be open to listening to our critiques of critical theory.

To that end, you’re about to get a quick crash course in the unearned advantages that whites still experience over blacks in 2019. I’m not going to talk about history or slavery or Jim Crow, even though these are relevant. I’m not going to talk about theoretical models of racial identity formation or white supremacy. I’m a scientist. I’m going to show you data. I’m going to look at the results of surveys and experiments with careful controls to show you that our society is not colorblind and that race is still very much a source of unearned advantage.

First, job interviews. Here are the results of a matched-pair study by Dr. Devah Pager. They provided pairs of men with fake resumes and matched them by age, height, demeanor, even physical attractiveness. The only difference was that one was white and one was black. Then they sent them out to apply for entry-level jobs. What did they find? Whites received callbacks at twice the rate of blacks. What’s more, a white applicant who reported a criminal record was 20% more likely to receive a callback than a black applicant with no criminal record.

Here’s another study. This time, a non-partisan economic think-tank sent out identical resumes. They only changed one variable: the name. Some resumes had white-sounding names like ‘Emily’ and ‘Greg.’ Others had black-sounding names like ‘Lakisha’ and ‘Jamal.’ Otherwise the resumes were identical. Results? ‘White’ resumes had a 50% higher response rate.

Here’s a review that looked at over two dozen employment studies. All the studies since 1990 showed that the response rate for whites was higher than for blacks, on average by around 40%. What’s more, according to this study, that relative hiring disparity hasn’t changed in thirty years.

Here’s an interesting experimental study from Australia. Actors were recruited to ride a bus with an empty fare card. They had a fare card, but it had no money on it. White bus drivers permitted whites to ride for free over 75% of the time. They permitted blacks to ride for free less than 40% of the time. That factor of two difference was seen for Asian and Indian bus drivers as well, but not for black bus drivers, who showed a much smaller racial disparity. What we’re seeing in all these studies are the unearned advantages that whites have over blacks, in hiring, in public accommodations, and in many other areas.
What about personal attitudes? Things have gotten better, no question. But in 2013, 16% of whites did not approve of interracial marriage (only 4% of blacks did not approve). That’s about 1 in 6 whites who don’t approve of interracial marriage.

Here’s a different survey. Again, things have improved, but 14% of non-blacks would not approve of a relative marrying a black person.

Another poll from 2018, 28% of Republicans and 12% of Democrats think interracial marriage is not just ‘inadvisable’ in some vague sense, but is ‘morally wrong.’

But surely, Christians wouldn’t exhibit that kind of racism? Last figure. In 2008, 34% of self-identified white Evangelicals would oppose the interracial marriage of a close relative. Bradley Wright, a Christian sociologist, notes that “Among Evangelicals... we see no evidence of prejudicial attitudes decreasing with church attendance.” In other words, even practicing evangelicals who attended church regularly showed similar levels of opposition to interracial marriage.

Time-out. Do all these results seem unbelievable to you? Listen, they seem unbelievable to me. My father immigrated here from India in the 1970s. I grew up in an integrated neighborhood and had Jewish friends, black friends, white friends. I can’t name a single person I know who opposes interracial marriage. Not one. All of my experience with very conservative evangelical churches has been unequivocally positive. As a whole, evangelical Christians are the kindest, gentlest, most compassionate people I’ve ever met.

But this is important: my experience is anecdotal. If I have to choose between my anecdotal experience and the data, I trust the data. These data show that racial biases and discrimination persist to this day. If your church is anything like the national average, then 1 in 6 whites in the pews (and around 1 in 25 blacks) oppose interracial marriage.

Serious question: do the people in your congregation know that racism is a sin? I’m serious. Have people understood the implications of the idea that all people are created in the Imago Dei, that we are all fallen, and that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ?

I know you’re worried that if you talk about racism, people might think you’re virtue signaling. But aren’t you more worried that people won’t repent of their sin? Aren’t you more worried that people are embracing a false, unbiblical, and sinful anthropology? I’m not asking you to go into church with guns blazing, calling everyone a racist. I’m just asking you to take this issue seriously. Brothers and sisters, don’t let anyone prevent you from confronting error with Scripture, whether it’s the error of critical theory or the sin of racism. Don’t dismiss it. Don’t ignore it. Talk about it.

Second, avoid labels, especially the ‘M’-word: Marxism. Don’t be that guy. Are there historical connections between critical theory and Marxism? Yes. Are many critical theorists today professing Marxists? Yes. Is it either fruitful or helpful to start screaming ‘Marxism’ as soon as you hear the words ‘white privilege’ or ‘systemic racism.’ No. A thousand times no. Most evangelicals who are influenced by critical theory have no idea what it is or where it comes from. So what’s the point of calling them Marxists? What’s that going to accomplish? They’re going to just write you off as a crazy, right-wing Alex Jones fanboy. My advice is to avoid labels entirely. Why?
Consider the following conversation. Imagine that you’re a conservative and you say something like this: “I think immigration laws should exist.” And this is the response you get: “AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM is captive to RIGHT-WING, FASCIST, WHITE SUPREMACIST, NATIONALIST ideologies that have more in common with the philosophy of AYN RAND than the teachings of Jesus.” Ok, how open are you to further dialogue? How seriously do you take the other person at this point? Not very seriously at all. He’s not really listening to you. He’s just reacting emotionally to some caricature he saw on MSNBC. Thumbs down.

Ok, now let’s imagine that a young, restless, and reformed Christian says to you: “I think affirmative action laws should exist.” How do you respond? “‘WOKE’ EVANGELICALISM is captive to PROGRESSIVE, SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, GLOBALIST ideologies that have more in common with the philosophy of KARL MARX than the teachings of Jesus.” Excellent strategy. That will definitely open him up to a rational discussion of this issue. That was sarcasm, guys. That’s a terrible strategy.

Perhaps the worst aspect of using labels to dismiss ideas instead of engaging them rationally and biblically, is that it’s polarizing people. It’s driving them farther into their camps. I’ve seen it happen. By all means, point out error. But follow basic rules of good dialogue. Find points of agreement. Clarify points of disagreement. Don’t make assumptions. Ask lots of questions. Define terms very carefully. Define terms very carefully. I could hammer this last point for hours. Ask me later.

Number three: read broadly. READ broadly. Don’t get your understanding of these issues from the news. It’s sensationalistic and shallow. If you want to learn about some subject like race, read books on it from multiple perspectives, by authors like the ones shown here. “But wait,” you say, “I thought we’re supposed to get multiple perspectives. Why are all the people in this picture black men?” Right. Because black men all have the same perspective on race? No! Racial groups, gender groups, and economic classes are not monoliths. People are individuals with their own ideas. Just because the authors you read are multi-colored, doesn’t mean they are ideologically diverse. That’s no guarantee. Read broadly. And read critically. In fact, reading broadly will help you read critically because if the authors you’re reading are making contradictory claims, you’ll be forced to decide which claims are true and which are false. If everyone you’re reading says exactly the same thing, you’ll never be forced to think critically.

One quick recommendation: if you want a model for pursuing racial unity in your church, pick up Prof. George Yancey’s Beyond Racial Gridlock. He’s not offering a magic bullet and I don’t think we even agree on everything. But Prof. Yancey emphasizes the importance of active listening and he grounds all of his suggestions in a deeply biblical, gospel-centered worldview.

Lastly, we need to uphold the primacy of the gospel for both Christians and non-Christians.

First, let’s talk about keeping the gospel central for Christians. Here are the two most important questions we need to ask when it comes to ‘social justice.’ Number one: is ‘social justice’ an imperative? Let’s set aside the question ‘what is social justice?’ and just ask “does God command it? Is it something we ought to do?” For the sake of argument, let’s assume that the answer is ‘yes.’

Number two: “is the gospel an imperative? Is it something you have to do? Is it a moral obligation you have to fulfill?” No. And it’s extremely important to get that answer right.
The gospel is an indicative statement. It is ‘good news’ about what God has done on our behalf, through Christ. It’s the good news of his perfect life, his lordship, his substitutionary atonement, his defeat of death, his resurrection, and his ascension. The gospel is news, not advice. It is ‘done’ not ‘do.’ If social justice is an imperative, an obligation, something that we ‘ought’ to do, then it is very good and important. But it is the Law, not the Gospel.

This idea was crucial to the Reformation and it’s still crucial today. If you think that ‘social justice’ – however you define it - is a Christian imperative, that it’s something Christians absolutely must do, just make sure you don’t insert it into the gospel. Yes, we should live justly, and love mercy. Yes, we should love our neighbor as ourselves. Yes, we should care for the vulnerable.

But we have failed to do that. We are condemned as law-breakers and deserve God’s wrath. The gospel is the good news that, in spite of our failure to pursue justice, Jesus came to save us, the righteous for the unrighteous, the just for the unjust. When we trust in him, then God gives us the power and the desire to follow his commands. But we dare not mingle the glorious “it is finished” declarations of the Gospel with the “do this and live” imperatives of God’s moral Law. The Law condemns. The Gospel saves.

Second, let’s keep the gospel central for non-Christians. Critical theory insists that our fundamental moral duty is working for the liberation of the oppressed. And many people today feel confident in their own righteousness precisely because they are engaged in that pursuit. They care about social justice. They care about the poor. They Retweet the right Tweets, they share the right posts, they vote for the right candidates.

But “seeking the liberation of oppressed groups” is not our only moral duty. God cares about the oppressed, but he also cares about sexual purity. He hates oppression, but he also hates idolatry. Non-Christians, especially those who have been influenced by critical theory, need to hear this truth. None of us has the clean hands and the pure heart that God requires. All of us have fallen short of God’s standards. The wealthiest, most powerful oppressor and the poorest, most degraded oppressed person are both sinners who need a Savior.

We can’t risk ambiguity on this issue because it is this Gospel of the finished work of Christ that creates the church, that transforms hearts, that changes oppressors into servants, and that breaks down the wall between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, black, white, Hispanic, and Asian. Let’s keep the gospel pure and keep it central. Because if we lose the gospel, we lose everything.