

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Critical

A collage of images including a church steeple, three raised fists, and a torn piece of paper with text.

Dilemma

**The Rise of Critical Theories
and Social Justice Ideology—
Implications for the Church and Society**

Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer

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Since the mid-2010s, a notable shift has occurred within our culture that some observers have dubbed “the Great Awakening.” Terms and phrases like *white fragility*, *heteronormativity*, *white privilege*, *intersectionality*, and *cisgenderism* have become part of our popular lexicon. Discussions of racism, sexism, gender identity, sexuality, social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are suddenly everywhere, from corporate boardrooms to public school classrooms to church sanctuaries. Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer’s *Critical Dilemma* explores an area of knowledge known as critical theory, which undergirds the phenomenon of “wokeness.” Their book accurately, carefully, and thoroughly explains the ideas at the heart of contemporary critical theory before offering a critique grounded in the historic Christian faith. The authors repudiate racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice while offering a path forward toward genuine unity based on dialogue and a Christian understanding of our common humanity. *Critical Dilemma* is written to anyone, whether religious or nonreligious, who is trying to understand social justice ideology and its impact on our culture.

The book is divided into three parts: Understanding (chapters 2-7), Critiquing (chapters 8-12), and Engaging (chapters 13-15). Part 1 offers little, if any, criticism of the ideas of critical theory. Its main goal is to provide readers with a thorough grasp of contemporary critical theory and the various aspects of critical social theory that fuel and inform it. It also acknowledges elements of contemporary critical theory that are true and insightful. Part 2 critiques these ideas from a Christian perspective, but in a way that often overlaps or dovetails with secular criticism. Part 3 offers ideas for engaging with people who have embraced critical theory and for seeking real unity across lines of race, class, and gender.

This discussion guide contains a brief overview of each chapter along with questions designed to foster deeper reflection on the book’s material. It is ideal for high school and college classrooms, book clubs, church small groups, and Sunday schools.

1 – A Looming Crisis

In their introductory chapter, Shenvi and Sawyer present their main thesis: the myriad manifestations of wokeness that we see in our culture flow out of a particular view of reality that was birthed by a discipline known as critical theory. They offer numerous examples of wokeness in our culture, ranging from the Smithsonian Institute declaring that “rational, linear thinking” is an element of “whiteness” to CNN stating that “there is no consensus criteria for assigning sex at birth.” Rather than dismissing these statements as meaningless nonsense or partisan culture warring, we should recognize them as expressions of a coherent, comprehensive worldview, which people have variously dubbed *intersectionality* or *critical social justice* or *postmodern Neomarxism* or *reified postmodernism*. Shenvi and Sawyer suggest that the neutral term *contemporary critical theory* is the best label to use when describing this ideology.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you noticed our culture becoming more polarized since the mid-2010s? If so, how?
2. Have you noticed a shift in dominant cultural narratives surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc.? If so, how?
3. Have you encountered woke ideas in your church, school, workplace, or elsewhere? Alternatively, have you encountered anti-woke resistance to discussions about racism or sexism in these contexts? Describe your experiences.
4. What is your religious (or nonreligious) background? Does it influence your views on race, class, gender, sexuality, justice, etc.?
5. If you have heard the terms *critical race theory* or *queer theory*, share the context. Where did you first encounter them? How well do you think you understand these disciplines? Outside of *Critical Dilemma*,

how much **primary source** material have you reviewed and studied regarding these disciplines?

6. Have you heard or read terms like *systemic racism*, *intersectionality*, *white privilege*, *white fragility*, *heterosexism*, *cisgender*, or *microaggression*? Where? What other jargon have you heard related to race, class, gender, and sexuality?
7. On pages 12-16, the authors list three mistaken responses to critical theory: “This is all meaningless nonsense”; “This is just liberal-conservative political sparring”; and “This is why Christians should ignore so-called social justice issues.” Do you agree that these responses are mistaken? Why or why not?
8. Shenvi and Sawyer devote chapters 2-7 to understanding critical theory, withholding their criticisms until the second half of the book. What is their rationale for this decision? Do you agree with it?

2 – How Did We Get Here?

Contemporary critical theory will adapt itself to its cultural context, latching onto each society’s most pressing social problems. Consequently, to better understand the appeal of contemporary critical theory in the United States, chapter 2 takes a deep dive into the history of race and racism in America. Shenvi and Sawyer provide a brief but detailed treatment of two topics: slavery and Jim Crow. They highlight the brutality of slavery and the degrading treatment of Blacks and other people of color during the century between abolition in the 1860s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. While laws, institutions, and racial attitudes have changed substantially over the last four centuries, an understanding of America’s past actions will help readers recognize the legacy of these historic phenomena today.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel comfortable having discussions about race and racism? If not, can you identify the source of your discomfort?
2. What is your earliest memory involving race? When did you come to see yourself in racial terms?
3. Many Whites and people of color worry that discussions about historical racial injustices can be harmful both to individuals and to society. How do Shenvi and Sawyer respond to this concern?
4. Conservatives sometimes point out that the number of slaves trafficked to the American colonies was dwarfed by the number trafficked to the Caribbean, South America, and parts of the Arab world. Should this reality change our perspective on American slavery? Why or why not?
5. What stood out to you in the section on slavery in the United States (pages 41-52)? What surprised you? What moved you?
6. What stood out to you in the section on Jim Crow (pages 52-56)? What surprised you? What moved you?
7. Do you agree that a discussion about historic racism is important today, both for understanding the appeal of critical theory and for understanding contemporary racial problems? If so, why? If not, why not?

3 – Origins

Just as the history of race in the United States helps illuminate racial dynamics today, so the history of critical social theory helps illuminate the shape of contemporary critical theory. While accounts of the critical tradition vary, Shenvi and Sawyer provide a summary that aligns well with treatments provided by three

notable texts on the subject: Levinson et al.'s *Beyond Critique*, Agger's *Critical Social Theories*, and Calhoun's *Critical Social Theory*. The critical tradition largely began with Karl Marx, who understood social reality as a struggle between the oppressed (the working class) and their oppressors (the rich). Later theorists, from Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and others at the Frankfurt School to Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Kimberlé Crenshaw (among a host of lesser-known theorists) developed the critical tradition. They expanded on Marx's ideas to analyze factors including race, gender, sexuality, and physical ability.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of these theorists, if any, had you heard of prior to reading this chapter?
2. What similarities did you notice between Marx's ideas and the ideas of the subsequent theorists named in this chapter?
3. What did Neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci mean by *hegemony*? According to Gramsci, how did the hegemony of the ruling class impede communist revolution?
4. Paulo Freire criticized the "banking model of education," which treats students as empty receptacles who need to be filled with their teacher's expert knowledge. Did you experience this model of education as a student? Do you find Freire's critique of the banking model of education to have any legitimacy? If so, elaborate. How do Freire's concerns fit within critical theory's broader critique of *power* and *hegemony*?
5. Pierre Bourdieu popularized the term *cultural capital* to refer to the nonmonetary assets a person possesses in a given context. What are some forms of cultural capital that you can identify in your school, workplace, or community?

6. What are some ways that our society validates truth claims? In other words, what are the ultimate sources of authority in our society to which people appeal when their claims are challenged? Are these sources arbitrary? Or are they objectively reliable?
7. Explain Judith Butler's views on gender. According to her view, is gender simply a synonym for biological sex?
8. Can a person experience intersectional discrimination? For example, could a given company discriminate against young women specifically without discriminating against middle-aged women or young men? Or could a company discriminate against Black men, but not against White men or Black women?

4 – Contemporary Critical Theory

Contemporary critical theory grew out of the critical tradition discussed in chapter 3 and coalesced around an intersectional framework. Chapter 4 explains in detail the four central ideas of contemporary critical theory: (1) the social binary, (2) hegemonic power, (3) lived experience, and (4) social justice. The idea of the social binary holds that society is divided into oppressor groups and oppressed groups along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and a host of other identity markers. The ruling class, whether Whites, men, the rich, or heterosexuals, perpetuates and justifies their dominance through hegemonic power, their ability to impose their values and norms onto society. While all people are socialized into oppressive ways of thinking, marginalized people can achieve a critical consciousness through reflection on their lived experience of injustice. The end goal of contemporary critical theory is social justice, defined as the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives and the dismantling of systems and structures that perpetuate the social binary. These four core ideas, along with corollaries like privilege, intersectionality, microaggressions, and equity, offer a coherent explanation for the expressions of wokeness discussed in chapter 1.

Discussion Questions

1. According to contemporary critical theory, why does a poor, unemployed, disabled, single White mother still have white privilege?
2. Rich White men make up around 15 percent of the US population and are therefore technically a minority group. Why does contemporary critical theory regard them as a canonical “oppressor group”?
3. Some conservatives, in an attempt to defend individual rights, argue that the smallest intersectional category is the individual. How does this argument misunderstand intersectionality?
4. Most people would agree that a White person can be the target of small acts of racial discrimination and/or disrespect. Why wouldn’t contemporary critical theory consider these acts microaggressions?
5. In 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* called conservative Black California gubernatorial candidate Larry Elder “the Black face of white supremacy.” How would contemporary critical theory justify this accusation?
6. What is the difference between equality and equity, according to contemporary critical theory?
7. How do the ideas presented in chapter 4 explain the examples of wokeness listed in chapter 1? Can you think of any other examples of wokeness you’ve encountered that are now more comprehensible in light of these ideas?

5 – Critical Race Theory

Of all the critical social theories that are part of the critical tradition, critical race theory (CRT) has attracted the most public attention in recent years. CRT began in the 1980s and 1990s as a legal discipline that analyzed the presence and persistence of racism within American law, but has since expanded into fields like education, sociology, health care, and theology. Scholars routinely name 15 to 20 “tenets” of CRT, which can largely be organized under four central ideas: (1) racism is normal, permanent, and pervasive; (2) racism is concealed beneath ideas like colorblindness and meritocracy; (3) lived experience is crucial for dismantling racism; and (4) racism is one of many interlocking systems of oppression. These four ideas suffuse CRT scholarship and have been present as “defining elements” of CRT since its inception. In this chapter, Shenvi and Sawyer document and explain these four ideas in detail and then illustrate how they are employed by authors and activists who are *doing* CRT even if they don’t explicitly identify as critical race theorists.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever heard the claim that CRT is “just a legal theory” or that CRT is “only taught in graduate school”? Are these claims true? Why do you think they continue to be asserted?
2. How do critical race theorists define *racism*? Is it limited to individual acts of racial prejudice?
3. Why is CRT critical of “colorblindness” and “meritocracy”? Do you agree with these criticisms?
4. Explain how CRT uses “storytelling.” If someone objects that storytelling is not a legitimate form of legal scholarship, how might a critical race theorist respond?
5. Why does intersectionality undermine any attempt to apply CRT to race alone? Why must gender, sexuality, and other identity factors always be included in CRT’s racial analyses?

6. Explain how the four central ideas of contemporary critical theory (chapter 4) relate to the four central ideas of CRT named in chapter 5.
7. Do you agree with the claim that objective truth does not exist in social science and politics? How would that belief affect a person's attitudes toward the law and government?

6 – Queer Theory

Queer theory as a critical social theory is dedicated to troubling and dismantling the notion of the “gender binary.” Although queer theorists insist that the concept of “queer” resists definition, queer theory invariably revolves around several common themes. First, queer theorists draw a sharp line between biological sex and gender. Second, they understand gender to be a complex and arbitrary collection of assumptions about biology, behavior, identity, and sexuality. Third, they recognize the interrelationship between the oppressive social construction of the category of gender and the oppressive social construction of other categories like race, sexuality, class, and physical ability. Finally, given its roots in postmodernism, queer theory aims to deconstruct not just gender norms, but all norms that limit human autonomy (as queer theory perceives it). Although queer theorists are largely read by academic audiences, their ideas have rapidly permeated our culture and have been disseminated through television programs, marketing and advertising channels, movies, music, education, social media, political activism, etc.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does queer theory draw on feminism, gay liberation, and postmodernism?
2. Why are queer theorists hesitant to define the word *queer*?
3. How do queer theorists define *sex* versus *gender*?

4. On pages 188-190, Shenvi and Sawyer present an extended analogy between queer theory's view of gender and the hypothetical classification of students as either jocks or nerds. Explain this analogy. Can you think of other categories that are socially constructed like jock and nerd?
5. Contrast a Gramscian view of the social construction of gender with a Butlerian view of the social construction of gender.
6. Contrast the traditional view of the gender binary with queer theory's view of the complexity of gender categories.
7. Why do some queer theorists argue that even biological sex is a social construct?
8. What are the arguments that some queer theorists use to justify the moral permissibility of pedophilia (i.e., sex with children)?

7 – Positive Insights

While Shenvi and Sawyer strongly disagree with the core tenets of contemporary critical theory and see them as fundamentally incompatible with a Christian worldview, they also insist that critical theorists can make true statements that all people should affirm. Chapter 7 provides numerous examples, including “Race is a social construct,” “We do not live in a post-racial society,” “Intersex conditions lead to legitimate ethical questions,” and “Hegemonic power exists.” While critical theorists may misinterpret or exaggerate these claims, they are true and are grounded in ample evidence. Highlighting the true elements of critical theory is crucial, both for avoiding caricatures and for understanding why critical theory is appealing to so many people.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the motte-and-bailey rhetorical strategy. Why is it fallacious (i.e., invalid)? When someone deploys a motte-and-bailey, how can we respond?
2. Were you surprised by the data Shenvi and Sawyer presented showing the persistence of racial discrimination? Why or why not?
3. How do you define *colorblindness*? Do you agree that colorblindness is not the best approach to racism? Why or why not?
4. What are some norms, stereotypes, and expectations surrounding gender in our culture? Which of these are social constructs? Which of these are harmful or unjust?
5. Provide some examples of hegemonic narratives in our culture—i.e., narratives that are widely accepted as common sense and are rarely questioned.
6. Explain Bulverism. Why is it fallacious reasoning?
7. Give some examples of how a person’s “lived experience” can give them a more accurate understanding of reality. Give some examples of how a person can misinterpret their lived experience in a way that warps their understanding of reality.

8 – Protestant Theology: An Excursus

Because Part 2 (chapters 8-12) will offer a critique of contemporary theory rooted in an explicitly Christian worldview, chapter 8 provides an overview and explanation of historic Protestant (or evangelical) doctrine. Shenvi and Sawyer explain how evangelical theology draws on broader Christian theology and the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, as well as engaging with contemporary cultural issues. Evangelical theology affirms core Christian doctrines like the Trinity,

the deity of Christ, the resurrection, the exclusivity of Christ, and the final judgment. It also affirms the five *solas* of the reformation, the beliefs that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority and that Christians are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. These beliefs shape modern evangelical theology. Familiarity with Christian doctrine is important even for non-Christians, given the prominence of Christianity and evangelicalism both in America's history and in contemporary culture.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to distinguish evangelicalism as a sociopolitical movement from evangelical theology?
2. In your own words, give a brief summary of evangelical theology as it is described in this chapter.
3. In what ways have Christian values and norms influenced contemporary culture? Consider items as trivial as national holidays and as profound as individual human rights.
4. What does it mean that “God—not man—is at the center of the Christian worldview” (page 258)?
5. Why do evangelicals place such importance on the exclusivity of Christ (i.e., Jesus is the only way of salvation) and on evangelism?
6. How do evangelical theological beliefs affect evangelicals' positions on abortion and the priority of the eternal over the temporal?
7. What are some stereotypes about evangelical Christians? If you are an evangelical Christian or if you know any evangelical Christians personally, do you think these stereotypes are valid or invalid? How so?

9 – Problems with Contemporary Critical Theory

In chapter 9, Shenvi and Sawyer critique contemporary critical theory on multiple fronts. Fundamentally, they observe that contemporary critical theory often functions as an overarching worldview or lens through which we interpret all of reality. As a consequence, it will necessarily conflict with alternate worldviews, including the Christian worldview. However, contemporary critical theory is also wrong in certain respects in how it conceptualizes hegemonic power, lived experience, privilege, and identity. Not all hegemonic narratives are oppressive. Lived experience is not inviolable and should be challenged when it conflicts with objective evidence. Privilege should not be viewed primarily as a collective property of groups and instead is possessed by individuals on the basis of their particular circumstances. And we should view people as fundamentally united on the basis of our shared humanity rather than being divided into oppressed/oppressor groups locked in struggles for dominance.

Discussion Questions

1. Shenvi and Sawyer and many others argue that contemporary critical theory functions as a worldview because of how it answers all of life's big questions. Do you agree?
2. How does the belief that contemporary critical theory functions as a worldview help explain the zeal and dedication of many social justice activists?
3. What are some hegemonic norms or hegemonic discourses (i.e., widely accepted and taken-for-granted beliefs and narratives) that are non-oppressive?
4. If we view lived experience as inviolable and unchallengeable, how will that shape our approach to the Bible or to any other source of perceived ultimate authority (e.g., science, tradition)?

5. Have you ever lived or traveled outside your country of origin? Did you experience any loss of “privilege” in that foreign culture?
6. Can a person of color or a woman or a non-Christian experience “unearned advantage” in any situation at all? If so, why wouldn’t critical theorists call this unearned advantage “privilege”?
7. How do the Christian doctrines of the *imago Dei*, sin, and redemption undermine racism, sexism, classism, and contemporary critical theory?

10 – Problems with Critical Race Theory

While chapter 5 focused narrowly on self-identified critical race theorists, Shenvi and Sawyer emphasized that the ideas of CRT have had a broad impact on both scholarship and popular culture. Thus, in chapter 10, they critique these ideas as they are expressed both within academia and outside of it. CRT’s claim that racism is one of many “interlocking systems of oppression” conflicts with Christianity because it assumes that the Bible’s teachings on gender and sexuality are oppressive. Contrary to CRT, law is not merely a human construct nor a mechanism for justifying white supremacy. Instead, laws should and often do reflect God’s moral character. Not all racial disparities are solely the product of racism. Race is not and should not be our primarily political or social identity. And, for the Christian, temporal liberation from oppressive systems must never supplant spiritual liberation from bondage to sin as our primary need as human beings.

Discussion Questions

1. Shenvi and Sawyer argue that an author or activist can be identified as “doing CRT” even if they do not self-identify as a critical race theorist. Do you agree? If so, how does one avoid labelling any discussion of race as critical race theory?

2. Notable individuals and organizations like Ibram X. Kendi and Black Lives Matter explicitly connect antiracist activism to gender and sexuality. Where else have you seen this connection made explicit?
3. Is merit objective or subjective? Should institutions strive to become meritocracies?
4. What was the difference between Martin Luther King Jr.'s perspective on law versus the perspective of critical race theory?
5. Given our nation's history of racism, should we assume that racial disparities are evidence of racial discrimination? What are the benefits and dangers of this assumption?
6. Should race be a core component of our identities? Should race play any role in our identities? Should White people in particular have or seek to have a racial identity?

11 – Collective, Ancestral Guilt: An Excursus

Because CRT has developed largely as a secular discipline, it either ignores or does not dwell on concepts like sin and forgiveness. However, as Christians have been influenced by the ideas of CRT, some have tried to fuse CRT with a Christian understanding of these topics. Chapter 11 explores the concept of “collective, ancestral guilt,” the idea that human beings are morally tainted by the sins of their ancestors. Shenvi and Sawyer show that this idea conflicts with what the Bible teaches about sin and guilt and cannot be applied consistently by its proponents. Moreover, it will have devastating effects on attempts to pursue racial and ethnic unity within the church and society. They instead point to the categories of sins of omission, human depravity, and reconciliation in Christ as offering a more biblical approach to racial reconciliation.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you define the word *whiteness*? How does CRT conceptualize whiteness?
2. Do concepts like “whiteness,” “maleness,” and various forms of privilege function within critical theory like a secular analogue to the Christian doctrine of original sin? Why or why not?
3. Shenvi and Sawyer provide six arguments for rejecting the idea that Whites are guilty of the sins of their ancestors. Which did you find most compelling? Which did you find least compelling?
4. Should we call people of color to repent of the sins of their ancestors? Should we call individuals to repent for the sins that their demographic group is presently committing, even if they aren't personally committing those sins?
5. Do you use the term *racial reconciliation*? If so, how do you define it? If not, why not? Why is it wrong to use the term *racial reconciliation* when discussing race relations if there is no actual racial sin between the parties or people involved? How are the terms *racial unity* or *racial harmony* different from *racial reconciliation*? How are these terms more appropriate in situations where there is no racial sin between the parties or people involved?
6. Was the United States wrong to offer reparations to Japanese Americans who were unconstitutionally incarcerated during World War II? Compare and contrast that situation to the debate over reparations for slavery and Jim Crow.

12 – Problems with Queer Theory

In chapter 12, Shenvi and Sawyer provide a comprehensive overview and defense of the historic Christian view of gender and sexuality, both to help Christians see how it fits into a larger biblical vision of humanity and to rebut claims that it is regressive or rooted in bigotry. While most Christians realize that Christianity is incompatible with queer theory, they often fail to recognize just how corrosive queer theory's assumptions are. These assumptions will affect not only our views of gender and sexuality, but also our approach to theology as a whole, including our understanding of human nature, sin, redemption, and the authority of Scripture. As queer theory becomes normalized in our culture, it will become increasingly important to recognize and reject its core assumptions.

Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, describe the historic Christian understanding of gender and sexuality (pages 377-383). Which of these ideas is most challenging to modern intuitions about gender and sexuality that are held by many secular people and LGBTQ-affirming churches/organizations?
2. Does the existence of “third genders” in other cultures or the existence of intersex individuals challenge the notion of the gender binary? Why or why not?
3. Is it possible to love someone without affirming them? Why or why not? Are the experiences of anorexics or alcoholics relevant to this question?
4. Were you surprised by the unblushing celebration of marital sex found in the Bible? How do Christians reconcile the goodness of sex with the various prohibitions the Bible places on sexual activity?
5. Have you heard the stories of “detransitioners” (i.e., those who identified with the opposite gender and then reverted to their birth gender) before? What do these stories have in common?

6. Is it possible to adopt queer theory's deconstructive approach to gender and sexuality yet still retain traditional moral beliefs about polygamy and pedophilia? Why or why not?
7. How does "minor-attracted person" language and discourse normalize pederasty and pedophilia?

13 – Ideas That Will Devastate Your Church

The ideas of contemporary critical theory are unlikely to enter your church or school or workplace through law review articles or queer theory scholarship. Instead, they are often injected into mainstream discourse in the form of slogans that spread and are reinforced through repetition until they acquire the status of "common sense." Chapter 13 presents a number of these slogans, including "People of color in the US are oppressed," "Justice is part of the gospel," and "There can be no reconciliation without justice." Although these slogans can occasionally be interpreted in orthodox ways, they often contain implicit assumptions that are false and that will inevitably erode Christian orthodoxy.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you define *oppression*? According to this definition, are people of color in the US (or in your country) oppressed as a group? Using this same definition of oppression, which other groups are oppressed?
2. How does a Christian understanding of sin challenge the idea that sin is equivalent to harm or oppression?
3. Have you ever seen a person silenced because of their race or gender (e.g., "straight White males need to be quiet")? How does contemporary critical theory encourage this practice?

4. Most people agree that diversity is good. But which kinds of diversity are good (e.g., ethnic, gender, class, age, educational, viewpoint, etc.), and in what situations (churches, corporate boards, operating rooms, air traffic control towers)?
5. How do people typically interpret the phrase “Whiteness is wickedness”? Would people have the same reaction to the phrase “Blackness is wickedness”? Why or why not?
6. What are some of the problems with making racial reconciliation contingent on justice?
7. Social pressure affects how and even whether we announce our beliefs. Where have you felt pressure to either change your beliefs or to adapt them to make them more acceptable to your peers?

14 – Moving Forward

Engaging those who have embraced the ideas of critical theory requires us to understand why these beliefs appear attractive. Shenvi and Sawyer begin chapter 14 by arguing that sociological, psychological, moral, experiential, and spiritual reasons explain the allure of critical theory. Given these factors, undermining the appeal of critical theory requires clarifying the definition of *harm*, correcting people’s false beliefs about reality, challenging the idea that care and harm are the only moral concerns, and distinguishing love from affirmation. Healthy dialogue is crucial to changing people’s minds on these issues. Finally, the authors offer points of contemplation and action steps for those seeking to grow in their understanding of race and racism in the United States as a way of fostering genuine unity, within both the church and society.

Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, compare and contrast honor culture, dignity culture, and victimhood culture. Do you believe that large segments of our society have embraced victimhood culture? Why or why not?
2. How do the three “Great Untruths” enumerated by Haidt and Lukianoff in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (page 439) mesh with the ideas of contemporary critical theory?
3. Think about a time that you changed your mind on an important issue. How did it happen? What first made you open to considering a different perspective?
4. Shenvi and Sawyer believe that open dialogue is crucial for fostering unity and for pursuing truth, both within the church and within secular institutions. Do you agree? Why or why not? How does contemporary critical theory discourage or even prevent genuine dialogue?
5. Why is “active listening,” as described by sociologist George Yancey, important to dialogue?
6. Are you planning on implementing any of the action steps listed on pages 473-475? If so, which ones? Did you disagree with any of these action steps? If so, which ones. and why?

15 – Final Thoughts

In closing, Shenvi and Sawyer address four groups: non-Christians, woke-sympathetic Christians, Christians moderates, and anti-woke Christians. The primary concern of non-Christians, they argue, should not be whether Christianity “works” to fight wokeness, but whether it is true. To woke-sympathetic Christians and Christian moderates, they offer a warning: the ideas of contemporary

critical theory are corrosive and incompatible with the Christian faith. They must be repudiated. Finally, anti-woke Christians should be patient and gentle, refusing to ignore real racism and extending charity to those with whom they disagree while steadfastly maintaining their opposition to critical theory. Wokeness may be a passing fad or it may fundamentally transform our society. But however long it lasts, it is doing significant harm and ought to be resisted—out of love for God and love for our neighbor.

Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, what were the strongest parts of *Critical Dilemma*? What were the weakest? Why? What would you have changed about the book?
2. Did you think the book presented the ideas of critical theory accurately and fairly? Why or why not?
3. Did you agree with the book's analysis of critical theory? Which of Shenvi and Sawyer's arguments were the most persuasive? Which were the least persuasive?
4. Did *Critical Dilemma* help you better understand the Christian view of reality and why it conflicts with critical theory? Why or why not?
5. Did *Critical Dilemma* help you better understand the seemingly disconnected elements of wokeness in our culture? Do they now make more sense as manifestations of a coherent, comprehensive worldview?
6. What was your biggest takeaway from *Critical Dilemma*?