

Christianity and critical race theory

By Christopher Watkin

*'today my church, like so many others, is sharply divided, despite the fact that its ministers can agree on a very long and detailed doctrinal statement, the Westminster standards. So why all the conflict? It is not as much over doctrine as over what our relationship to the culture should be. And as I look around, I see this same division roiling Christian denominations and organizations everywhere.'*¹

*'Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it.'*²

Summary

For some Christians critical race theory is part of a dangerous 'woke' agenda threatening the church; for others it holds valuable insights into biblical themes of justice and reconciliation. This paper takes a careful look at critical race theory through the work of Derrick Bell, one of its founders, before contrasting it to classical liberalism, which is often seen as the default alternative. It is argued that the biblical pattern of creation, fall, redemption and consummation stakes out a position on race, oppression and freedom that is different to both critical race theory and liberalism, from which they both borrow, which they both distort, and which alone offers concrete hope for the future of race relations.

Introduction

A woman stares down the lens of the camera and into our eyes. Her expression is weary, her tone angry. 'How can you win?' she cries, with the air of a question she has asked a thousand times before. The answer: 'You can't win. The game is fixed. So when they say, "Why do you burn down the community? Why do you burn down your own neighbourhood?" It's not ours. We don't own anything. We don't own *anything*.'

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Kimberly Jones's viral video³ gave voice to the anger and anguish felt by many black men and women in the US and beyond in the face of a society pervaded by systemic racism. Like a Monopoly game in which one player has everything taken away from them round after round, Jones spoke of a society rigged so that black people cannot succeed, however hard they work and whatever the content of their character. Trying harder is not the answer; new initiatives are not the answer. The system is broken. It needs to be torn down and replaced.

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The assumptions and commitments that inform this view of a systemically racist society go by multiple names: social justice, standpoint theory, intersectionality, critical race theory (CRT), 'woke' culture and identity politics among others. In this paper I will be using 'critical race theory' as a general term to capture this set of concerns.

1 Tim Keller, Foreword in Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 1.

2 Malcom X, *Malcom X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1990), 111.

3 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llci8MVh8J4>

Why does critical race theory matter?

Some readers might think that critical race theory is simply the latest fashionable ideology that – just as Marxism and postmodernism before it – will, like a spectacular firework, burn bright for a dazzling moment before smouldering quietly away in an obscure corner of academia, to be overtaken by the next shiny new idea. But such a dismissive attitude ignores both the influence of critical race theories on social and corporate policies, and also the lived experience of many who feel themselves represented in its claims. The spirit of critical race theory haunts not only the dusty halls of the academy, but also the corporate boardroom, the hospital ward and the school classroom.

Schools, hospitals and businesses now have policies on making the workplace safe for employees of all races; corporations employ diversity and inclusion officers to implement and maintain such policies, and each new employee has to be trained in, and abide by their rules. Universities cite student safety and wellbeing as a reason to ‘no-platform’ speakers who do not conform to critical theory’s orthodoxies, and they establish ‘safe spaces’ where certain topics are banned from discussion.

Critical race theory also matters for Christians in particular because, as part of a broader constellation of critical theories encompassing identity issues such as gender and sexuality, in recent years it has exposed fault lines in evangelical and Reformed communities on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴ The division usually runs between those who principally seek to repudiate CRT as an existential threat to the church, and those who principally seek to learn from it.⁵ In the Church of England, the epicentre of the debate has been around the question of systematic racism within the church, with the publication in April 2021 of *From Lament to Action*, the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Anti-Racism Taskforce.⁶ Divisions around the question of systemic racism are considerable and growing, and over time its potential to cause major and damaging splits in local congregations and within denominations only increases.

In view of these widespread social changes and tensions among Christians, it would be unwise to see the rise of CRT as just one more passing social fad. The question of how this way of understanding social relations has gained such traction so quickly must be the topic for another time. In the present paper I would like to concern myself with the question of how Christians should understand, and engage with, critical race theory’s assumptions, priorities and concerns.

What is critical race theory?

Like ‘postmodernism’ before it, critical race theory has a complex genealogy. Here I draw primarily on the work of



the ‘man behind critical race theory’⁷ and its ‘spearhead’,⁸ Derrick Bell, Harvard’s first black law professor. While Bell’s work might be considered to be on the hard-line or pessimistic side of the CRT spectrum, foregrounding Bell has three advantages: 1) he is widely considered the originator of critical race theory; 2) the sketch below offers an ‘ideal’ or ‘pure’ type of CRT that we may never encounter in its entirety in the wild, so to speak, but elements of which may well be present in our interactions and institutions; and 3) the way in which CRT is received, mediated and discussed in the church often privileges its more extreme forms, and in our current age of political polarisation and general drift away from the centre these more extreme ideas are the ones that currently exercise Christian commentators.⁹

We can understand CRT in terms of eight principles.

1 Racism is structural and permanent

Almost any social theory will identify some groups as disadvantaged or oppressed with respect to others, but the distinctiveness of critical race theory is that it sees this disadvantage as a permanent feature of society, not merely a function of people’s attitudes in the present. In other words, racism is not simply the result of the way people think, but it is a perennial feature of modern Western societies in a way that cannot be addressed by better education. For prominent US critical race theorist Richard Delgado, racism is ‘the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country’.¹⁰ This also means that oppression is ubiquitous: racism does not exist in isolated pockets in society; it is the cultural air we breathe, and we either inflict it (if we are white) or suffer it (if we are black) every day. In the words of Derrick Bell, ‘racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society’.¹¹ The question to ask of any social situation or institution is not *whether* it is racist, but *how* it is racist.

4 The language of a ‘fault line’ is taken from Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington DC: Salem Books, 2021).

5 Baucham places in the former group Tom Ascol, Owen Strachan, Douglas Wilson, and the late R.C. Sproul, with John MacArthur, one of its most prominent spokespeople, proclaiming that critical theory is ‘the greatest threat’ to the gospel in his lifetime (*Fault Lines* 17). In the latter group he

puts Thabiti Anyabwile, Tim Keller, Russell Moore, 9Marks, the Gospel Coalition, and Together for the Gospel (T4G).

6 See <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf>

7 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/20/the-man-behind-critical-race-theory>

8 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57908808>

9 For a less extreme version of CRT-inflected ideas, the reader may be interested in the work of legal scholars Angela P. Harris and Wendy Chen-Wishhart.

10 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 7.

11 Bell, *Faces At The Bottom Of The Well*, ix.

2 *There is no neutrality*

It follows from oppression being structural and existing throughout society that its effects are felt not only by some black people, but by all: the group as a whole is a victim of society's structural, ingrained oppressions. Inversely, all white people are guilty of perpetuating this oppression, just as if they were failing to stand up against a totalitarian regime. To have lived in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union, knowing what the regime was like, and to have done nothing to oppose its crimes was morally culpable; to live in an institutionally racist society and merely to stand by is equally blameworthy. This is why the phrase 'I am not a racist' is given such short shrift by exponents of critical race theory:¹² one is either a racist (by default) or an anti-racist (by choice); one is either passively condoning racism, or actively struggling against it. No-one is neutral.

3 *White people are incapable of helping black people*

It is a strong tenet of Bell's critical race theory that there can be no collaborative, consensual solution to the problem of racism. He argues that all the civil rights advances in American history took place because they were in the strategic interests of white people at the time. This is sometimes known as 'convergence theory': the interests of black people in society are only advanced when they happen to converge with white interests.

4 *Only black people have the right to speak about racism*

One consequence of convergence theory is that the oppressors cannot be trusted to care for the interests of the oppressed, and any supposed attempt to do so is one more instance of oppression. Only the black people have the right to talk about racism, not only because they alone have experienced it, but also because they alone can be trusted to represent it accurately. It is considered unacceptable to question what a black person says about racism. This finds its roots in the 'standpoint theory' developed in 1970s and 1980s feminist circles, according to which 'all women share the same socially grounded perspective in virtue of being women'. Women also enjoy 'the assumption of automatic epistemic privilege' (or a privileged right to know and talk about their experience), a privilege that 'accrues to the subordinate automatically, just in virtue of their occupying a particular social position'.¹³ This is the origin of catchphrases such as 'believe women' and sometimes the stronger 'believe all women'.¹⁴

5 *Only white people can be racist*

The flipside of convergence theory is that those in oppressed

categories are excluded from being oppressors. This can be seen in some recent attempts to redefine racism, most notably the US Anti-Defamation League's decision in late 2020 to define racism as 'the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people'.¹⁵

This issue came to a head in 2022 with the temporary suspension of Whoopi Goldberg from her position on NBC's daytime show *The View*, after she insisted that the holocaust 'isn't about race' but rather a question of 'man's inhumanity to man', describing it as a conflict between 'two white groups of people'.¹⁶ In the wake of Goldberg's suspension, the ADL

adopted a new 'interim definition' that did not imply only white people could be racist: 'Racism occurs when individuals or institutions show more favorable evaluation or treatment of an individual or group based on race or ethnicity'.¹⁷

6 *Change must be revolutionary, not incremental*

If racism is structural, fundamental and inescapable for whites, then convergence theory dictates it cannot be solved by

consensual, incremental change. The interests of black people can only be served by measures that fundamentally break down and rebuild the fabric of society. Consensual, incremental change is futile because, in the title of a famous academic conference address given by black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde in 1979, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.¹⁸

7 *Equality is measured by outcome, not by opportunity*

Many critical theoretical positions insist on equality of outcome (for example: mandating that a given percentage of top management positions in a company should be filled by black people) rather than 'equality of opportunity' (for example: ensuring that everyone has the same chance in life to rise to a top management position). Once more, this flows from the structural and inveterate nature of racism. If racism is institutional then 'equality of opportunity' is just an illusion intended to perpetuate the racist status quo; justice can be served only by forcibly reshaping our social institutions through measures such as quotas and affirmative action.

8 *Final victory is impossible*

Even with the use of revolutionary means, however, there is no prospect of an end to racism. Derrick Bell is categorical that 'Black people will never gain full equality in this country' and any short-lived 'peaks of progress' will in time be accommodated to the deep patterns of 'white dominance'.¹⁹

12 See, for example, Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2019).

13 Kristina Rolin, 'Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations', *Hypatia*, 24:4 (2009): 218–226.

14 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Believe_women

15 See Nicole Chavez, 'Anti-Defamation League revised its definition of racism', CNN 4 February 2022. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/04/us/anti-defamation-league-racism-definition/index.html>

16 See <https://theconversation.com/whoopi-goldberg-awkwardly-demonstrates-how-the-idea-of-race->

[varies-by-place-and-changes-over-time-176505](https://www.adl.org/racism)

17 <https://www.adl.org/racism>

18 Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–114.

19 Bell, *Faces*.

Is liberalism the answer?

As we turn now to consider a Christian engagement with these ideas and claims, it is important to note that, in discussions both within and outside the church, CRT is often set in opposition (implicitly or explicitly) to a version of classical liberalism.²⁰ I therefore want to examine both critical race theory and liberalism side by side, lest in seeking to flee one unbiblical ideology Christians find themselves running unknowingly into the arms of another. Both CRT and liberalism capture something of the complex biblical picture of justice, but both fall short – in different ways – of its rich complexity. As theologian and social theorist Charles Mathewes notes, Christians must not allow any political position to become ‘the uncontested ideology of our souls’.²¹

As with the sketch of CRT above, the version of liberalism I present here is an ideal type, and therefore in some ways a caricature, but it will serve to help us understand the poles towards which contemporary positions gravitate.²²

The summary table below helps to clarify some of the tendencies ascribed to each position:

Critical race theory	Classical liberalism
Racism is structural and permanent	Racism is a result of individual ignorance, greed or lust for power, and is temporary
There is no neutrality	There is broad consensus and substantial neutrality
White people are incapable of helping black people	Everyone can work together to help black people
Only black people have the right to speak about racism	Everyone has the right to speak about racism
Only white people can be racist	Anyone can be a racist
Change must be revolutionary	Change is incremental
Equality is measured by outcome; affirmative action	Equality is measured by opportunity; ‘colour-blind’ policies
Final victory is impossible	Society is gradually progressing towards ever greater perfection

The question Christians need to ask of CRT (or of liberalism, or any other ideology for that matter) is not simply ‘is it biblical?’, for no modern political dogma will adequately reflect the Bible’s core teaching. Our concern should rather be to discern how Christians should engage with post-

Christian ideologies, such as CRT, that traffic in vocabulary with deep biblical resonances like ‘justice’. Fortunately, both in the Bible and in church history we find responses to precisely this question. I will explore two salient examples: Paul’s treatment of Jewish ‘power’ and Greek ‘wisdom’ in 1 Corinthians 1, and Augustine’s engagement with Roman ‘glory’ in *The City of God*. These two examples will equip us for our own contemporary encounter with CRT and liberal conceptions of ‘justice’.

Paul on Greek ‘wisdom’ and Jewish ‘signs’

In 1 Corinthians 1, how does Paul deal with two of the dominant cultural values of his day, namely that ‘Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom’ (1:22)? He does not simply affirm wisdom as the Greeks understand it, nor signs as the Jews think of them, but neither does he completely reject these values either. Let us examine the example of wisdom.

First, Paul establishes a hard antithesis between the ‘wisdom of the world’ and the wisdom of God (1:20, 27–28). The wisdom of the world is not halfway to being God’s wisdom; it is categorically ‘foolish’. The unbridgeable antithesis between the two can be seen in the fact that God’s wisdom is cruciform (1:24), which to the Greeks looks like utter foolishness (1:23).

Secondly, however, Paul sets in counterpoint to this antithesis a note of fulfilment. Worldly wisdom and God’s wisdom are not simply two alternative, irreconcilable sapiential traditions. God’s wisdom is in fact ‘wiser’ than Greek wisdom (1:25). So God’s wisdom (Paul uses the same term, *sophia*, for both Greek and divine wisdom) embodies what worldly wisdom by its own lights strives for but can never attain. God’s ‘foolish’ wisdom is wise in a way that embodies the fullness of what human wisdom seeks, though humans can only find it by setting aside their pride and coming to the cross. Similarly, God’s ‘weak’ strength is stronger than any human strength, and the ultimate fulfilment of that for which human strength yearns.

Note that Paul is not offering his readers a lukewarm, wishy-washy ‘third-way’ compromise between antithesis and fulfilment. In 1 Corinthians 1, neither antithesis nor fulfilment weakens the other. To borrow a Chestertonian expression, Paul gives us ‘not an amalgam or compromise’ of antithesis and fulfilment, ‘but both things at the top of their energy’.²³

What Paul has brilliantly joined together, contemporary Christians are prone to separate. Those who insist on the antithesis between Christianity and CRT refuse to countenance the idea that Christianity may be a fulfilment of critical theoretical justice in the same way that it is a fulfilment of Greek wisdom and Jewish power. Conversely, those who see the gospel as a fulfilment of critical theoretical aspirations seldom emphasise the radical antithesis between the two. The double movement is captured well in Daniel

20 Liberalism in the European sense of a political philosophy emphasising individual choice and freedom in the tradition of John Locke, Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith, not in the North American sense of ‘progressive’.

21 Charles Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

22 Some thinkers, rather than opposing the two doctrines, consider CRT to be the logical outworking of a liberalism that has gone to seed. See, for example, John Gray, ‘The problem of hyper-liberalism’, TLS 30 March 2018. Available at [https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/problem-hyper-](https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/problem-hyper-liberalism-essay-john-gray/)

liberalism-essay-john-gray/; Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

23 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies*, ed. David Dooley (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press 1986), 296.

Strange's term 'subversive fulfilment', borrowed from the missiologist J. H. Bavinck. For Bavinck and Strange, the gospel both 'subverts in that it confronts, unpicks and overthrows the world's stories' and 'fulfils in that it connects and is shown to be worthy of our hopes and desires', encouraging us to exchange our old stories for new ones which turn out to be 'the originals from which our false stories are smudged and ripped fakes'.²⁴

Augustine on Roman glory

We can see a similar double movement at play in Augustine's *City of God*, outside the Bible perhaps the single most influential text of Christian social and political thought in the last two thousand years. The way in which Augustine engages with late Roman society bears striking resemblances to Paul's attitude to Greek wisdom and Jewish signs. The first sentence in Book I of *The City of God* begins in Augustine's Latin with the word '*Gloriosissimam*':²⁵ 'Most glorious' is the city of God. This is no adventitious choice; the virtue of glory (*gloria*) was central to the Roman ethic, Rome's favourite way of characterising itself, and most thoroughly unbiblical in its connotations. Rome finds its 'glory' in self-aggrandising conquest, subjugation, domination, and military victory: not values that one would readily associate with the Christ of the gospels.

Augustine does not simply reject this central Roman virtue as thoroughly violent and objectionable, nor does he try to argue that Christianity is a means to achieve the Roman ideal of glory in its own terms. Instead, he first painstakingly unpicks Rome's sense of its own glory, showing it to be self-contradictory and self-defeating (*City of God* Books I-X), and then demonstrates how true glory is to be found in the Christ of the biblical storyline (books XI-XXII). Together, Paul and Augustine provide us with a playbook for engaging not only with CRT and liberalism, but with whatever dominant social and political movements may emerge in the future, in a way that neither lets them remake the church and the gospel in their own image, nor dismisses their concerns and commitments out of hand.

The Bible on contemporary social justice

With the examples of Paul's 'wisdom/signs' and Augustine's 'glory' in mind, we now turn to the issue we face in our own day: the particular understanding of 'justice' that has arisen in critical race theory, and the resistance to that understanding represented by classic liberalism. My premise here is that

Paul and Augustine provide us with a playbook for engaging not only with CRT and liberalism, but with whatever dominant social and political movements may emerge in the future.

both CRT and liberalism are Christian heresies, taking the form of a distorted gospel with their own versions of the four key biblical theological turning points – creation: what exists; fall: what is wrong with the world; redemption: how it can be fixed; and consummation: where it is all leading. Christians can therefore profitably approach the study of justice in CRT and liberalism as an exercise in comparative religion.²⁶

For each key moment in the Bible's storyline I will briefly sketch the CRT and liberal positions, before turning to Scripture itself which, I will argue, diagonalises (cuts across and rearranges) orthodoxies of both critical race theory and liberalism.²⁷ This exercise reveals them both to be reductive heresies, taking elements of biblical truth and cutting them off from other complementary truths, distorting and falsifying them in the process.

Creation

CRT – Identity markers like race are fundamental to human existence. To think that one can get behind them to a generic 'humanity' is itself an oppressive dogma.

The fundamental unit of social life is the group united by a particular identity marker. In terms of the philosophical dichotomy of the one and the many, the accent falls on the many: many unique and distinct social groups.

Liberalism – Identity markers like race are incidental to our shared, universal humanity. What exists are humans who happen to be black or white. Society should be colourblind. The fundamental unit of social life is the individual. In terms of the philosophical dichotomy of the one and the many, the accent falls on the 'one' of universal humanity.

Bible – Like liberalism's universal, all humans are equally in the image of God.²⁸ Within this overarching framework I can belong to many groups, including those foregrounded by CRT, but they can never capture my identity at its most fundamental level. God sees individuals as more than members of their groups,²⁹ and yet can deal with nations (not races, a concept which is foreign to the Bible) en bloc.³⁰ The accent falls both on the one and the many, or rather on the unity and glorious diversity of all things – including all peoples and groups – in Christ. People are more than their group identities, but they are not abstracted from those identities.³³

Fall

CRT – Society is violent, and oppression is endemic and

24 Daniel Strange, *Plugged In* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2019), 102.

25 The first sentence in English reads, 'Most glorious is and will be the City of God, both in this fleeting age of ours, wherein she lives by faith, a stranger among infidels, and in the days when she shall be established in her eternal home.'; and in Latin, '*Gloriosissimam civitatem Dei sive in hoc temporum cursu, cum inter impios peregrinatur ex fide vivens, sive in illa stabilitate sedis aeternae*

quam nunc expectat per patientiam.' See https://www.loebclassics.com/view/augustine-city_god_pagans/1957/pb_LCL411.11.xml

26 I am not the first to make this suggestion. John McWhorter makes a powerful case in *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (Rugby: Swift Press, 2021), and both Baucham (*Fault Lines*) and Pluckrose and Lindsay (*Cynical Theories*) make this claim in relation to CRT.

27 For a fuller discussion of diagonalisation, see my *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

28 Gen. 1:27.

29 Luke 12:7; 15:1–7.

30 Acts 17:26.

31 Col. 1:16–17.

32 Gal. 3:28.

33 e.g. Col. 3:18–22.

ineradicable. The world is divided into groups of oppressors and oppressed. Guilt is shared among all members of the oppressor group, in something equivalent to an original sin of whiteness. I am guilty of and responsible for the historical and contemporary actions of groups to which I belong. The problem of oppression is structural: injustice is systemic and baked into modern society.

Liberalism – Society is fundamentally consensual and is progressing towards greater happiness and concord. Guilt and responsibility are individual: no-one is guilty simply because of the group they belong to, and no-one bears guilt or responsibility for what they did not do themselves. The problem of oppression is the result of some combination of personal vices including ignorance, greed, and the lust for power.

Bible – The position is more complex than either CRT or liberalism allows. Oppression is not fundamental to God's world³⁴ but it is inevitable in this postlapsarian age.³⁵ Alongside the liberal, the Bible affirms that sin and guilt are universal³⁶ and individual.³⁷ Each person will die for his or her own sin, not the sins of their forefathers.³⁸ Nevertheless, the Bible agrees with CRT that we are responsible for the past and for our social groups, not in the sense that the actions of others were our fault, but in the sense that it is our burden to confess, lament and remedy them,³⁹ though we bear a greater, more direct responsibility for our own sins than for the sins of our nation or group. Alongside CRT the Bible affirms that some groups – often 'the poor' or widows, orphans and strangers⁴⁰ – are systemically and repeatedly victims of oppression at the hands of others – often 'the rich', 'evildoers' or 'the godless'.⁴¹ Judgement can be visited on nations and offspring as well as on individuals.⁴² God cares in a particular way for specific disadvantaged groups, but like a good liberal he does not show partiality.⁴³

Redemption

CRT – There is an endless struggle between oppressor and oppressed. Justice for the latter can only come at the price of the overthrow of the former: it is a zero-sum game. Salvation does not come from transcending my group, but from embracing it. Becoming righteous, or 'woke', is an achievement, often the fruit of a careful and painstaking education in the reality and pervasiveness of systemic racism. Forgiveness is hard to come by, with job losses, 'cancelling' and public shaming ensuing from individual infractions of CRT orthodoxies, no doubt compounded by social media. Repentant offenders frequently remain unforgiven.

Liberalism – Classical liberalism, by contrast, sees

salvation in terms of each individual choosing their own version of the good life – 'At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life'⁴⁴ – making any such vision of the good life a matter of purely personal choice.

Bible – The struggle is not primarily between different groups in society, nor is it to amass the trappings of self-realisation; it is against evil forces.⁴⁵ Salvation is not the victory of one group over another, nor is it akin to individual self-realisation indexed by exterior success; it is a gift received by grace. Grace cuts across both CRT's racial groupings and liberalism's idea of the autonomous individual. It leaves no room for looking down on the unsaved and culpable, or for thinking oneself superior for being saved.⁴⁶ Through the death and resurrection of Christ, grace also offers the Christian a new identity grounded neither in autonomous liberal selfhood nor in the group identities of critical theories.⁴⁷ Forgiveness is offered without distinction and without reservation to all who repent,⁴⁸ regardless of their offence. The Christian identity marker of being 'in Christ' cuts across and relativises the sort of identity markers fundamental to CRT, while also undermining liberalism's atomised self-sufficiency and colourblind ideology.⁵⁰

Consummation

CRT – Racism will remain endemic. Society cannot be reformed without tearing it down first. There is no prospect of racial justice short of this radical unmaking of society.

Liberalism – Liberalism has its own moment of resignation: radical change to address questions of justice is eschewed in favour of incremental and consensual progress. There is no eschatology in this view, for tomorrow will be much like today. Some liberals have understood progress to culminate in an 'end of history' in which economic and social liberalism becomes the dominant and uncontested worldwide system.⁵¹ For both CRT and liberalism, the only justice to be had is justice here and now, and the only judgement to serve as a yardstick of that justice is human judgement. It is therefore incumbent on social actors to pass categorical judgement on individuals, actions and language, on pain of losing a clear sense of justice altogether.

Bible – The Bible avoids CRT's apocalypticism of identity and its tragedy of perpetual conflict, as well as liberalism's incrementalism. Instead, it has an eschatological vision of radical transformative reconciliation in which the lion will lie down with the lamb, swords will be turned into

A profound distinctive of the biblical position, in contrast both to CRT and liberalism, is its positive message of hope.

34 Gen. 1–2.

35 John 16:33.

36 Rom. 3:10–12.

37 Deut. 24:16.

38 Ezek. 18:14–18.

39 Dan. 9:4–19. For a longer discussion of corporate responsibility in the Bible, see Timothy Keller, 'Justice in the Bible', available at <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>

40 Job 24; Jer. 7:6.

41 Jas. 5:1–5; Ps. 14:6; Job 20:6.

42 Joel 3:2; Exod. 20:5; 2 Sam. 12.

43 Deut. 10:8, 17.

44 Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey :: 505 U.S. 833 (1992) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/>

45 Eph. 6:12.

46 Eph. 2:9; 1 Tim. 1:15.

47 1 Cor. 15:10.

48 1 John 1:8–9.

49 See Gal. 3:28; Luke 14:26.

50 Rev. 7:9.

51 See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

ploughshares, and there will be no more mourning, crying or pain, but this is not at the expense of leaving injustice unpunished.⁵² Identity itself shares in this eschatological dimension, for 'what we will be has not yet been made known'.⁵³ There is both the hope of a radical overturning of the status quo, and an imperative for achieving incremental change on the ground here and now. Rather than being in tension with each other, the radical hope is fuel for the effort of incremental change.⁵⁴

In each of these four areas of creation, fall, redemption and consummation, both CRT and liberalism dismember the biblical account, making partial truths into the whole truth. Only the Bible marries concern for the oppression of particular groups with a rigorous commitment to universality, and individual guilt with collective responsibility; only the Bible sets forth a way of salvation that does not lead to social fragmentation, resentment and disdain. Only the Bible holds out a hope for the future that does not collapse either into cynicism, apocalyptic violence or an impoverished incrementalism.

Guiding principles

The extent to which, in the coming months and years, the church can find a way to wrestle with the issues of race and systemic oppression in an honest, robust and healthy way will play a role in shaping its vitality and soundness in the decades to come. Issues of race are deep and painful, and Christians should be wary of a one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with them. More helpful in navigating through these choppy waters are broad, guiding principles that act like a lighthouse, helping us to keep on course through many adverse currents and buffetings, rather than a step-by-step guide to what to do in every situation. In the light of the biblical storyline of creation, fall, redemption and consummation outlined above, here are three important principles for Christians to bring to bear on questions of systemic racism.

Self-examination

One criticism of critical race theory is that it is often very uncritical of its own assumptions and approach. The Bible, however, predisposes Christians to have a healthy scepticism about their own motivations and blind spots. The line between righteousness and sin does not fall between different groups, but splits the heart of every believer, as Moses, David and Peter could all eloquently testify. Christians on both sides of the CRT debate would do well to entertain an ongoing and probing examination of our own blind spots and prejudices, language and actions in the light of a biblical view of justice.⁵⁵ Indeed, God requires it of us.⁵⁶ We must constantly be seeking to repent and put our faith anew in God, for 'if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall'.⁵⁷

Another facet of a robust, biblical self-critique is to reflect on the way each of us tends to engage in particular ways with cultural trends like CRT. For some of us, our instinct

is immediately to find where such theories are wrong, so that we can denounce them and appear faithful. For others, our first impulse is to engage with cultural trends just to see where they are right, so that we can join with them and appear relevant. Sadly, both approaches find what they are looking for, and receive their reward in full.

1 Corinthians 1 chastens and corrects all of us. For those of us desperate to seem relevant it insists upon an unfashionable cruciform antithesis. For those of us desperate to dig a trench as deep as possible between the church and the world, it confounds us by talking about God's *sophia*. And for those of us who always seek a reconciling middle ground or third way, it insists on a categorical antithesis and a glorious fulfilment, both at the top of their energy. No-one should walk away from 1 Corinthians 1 feeling comfortable.

Discernment

The second principle can be gleaned from the biblical wisdom literature, and can provide a guiding light for Christians seeking to navigate the questions of systemic racism in the boardroom, hospital ward, or school classroom.

One of the closest examples in the Scriptures to the situations in which Christians find themselves today is that of Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah at the Babylonian court of King Nebuchadnezzar. The friends are quite happy, as students at the University of Central Babylon, to learn 'the language and literature of the Babylonians' (Daniel 1:4). Indeed, they excel in their end-of-year exams (Daniel 1:19–20), which would have almost certainly included religious instruction inimical to the Hebrew Bible. And yet, it appears that they did not confuse or seek to conflate this Babylonian wisdom with their own knowledge of Yahweh (e.g. Daniel 9), and if pushed on an issue central to their commitment to the LORD they would rather risk dismissal and even death than cease to worship God (Daniel 3; 6).

What can we draw from this account? Surely that there is a subtlety to the actions of Daniel and his friends, just as there is a subtlety to the biblical account of justice that is flattened and over-simplified by both CRT and liberalism. Daniel is not always the Daniel of chapter 1, obediently learning the Babylonian culture and advising the king in accordance with it, nor is he always the Daniel of chapter 6, heroically undergoing trial by lion because of his refusal to worship the king. Similarly, Christians need to realise that there is no single response to 'critical race theory'. The term is used in a variety of different ways by different people in different contexts, and we must not assume a particular stance before taking care to understand how the term is being used in a given instance, and what it is intended to imply.

The wisdom literature also contains a range of modes of engagement with pagan cultures, for example, the contrast between the considered, careful wisdom that can be found in some of the proverbs, and the stark injunctions of the prophets. Both genres of writing speak into the same sociopolitical and theological realities – a sovereign God who

52 Rev. 21:4; 20:12.
53 1 John 3:2.

54 1 Cor. 15:58.
55 John 8:7.

56 Mic. 6:8.
57 1 Cor. 10:12.

covenants with his disobedient people, through monarchy, exile, and return – but their perspectives on those realities are markedly different. While the prophets repeatedly and forcefully denounce Israel’s disobedience in stark terms, certain proverbs take a more diplomatic approach, working in the cracks of oppressive regimes and letting discretion be the better part of valour. As Michael Walzer notes, ‘[a]gainst the prophetic demand that the king listen only to the word of God, the wise live comfortably in a world shaped by their own words,’ and ‘[t]heir own good advice is worldly and strategic, aimed at accommodating differences, reaching a compromise, negotiating alliances, and, only as a last resort, making war.’⁵⁸ If the Bible contained only prophetic stridency, or only proverbial strategy, then the Christian’s path would be more straightforward. But the plural voices of the biblical account demand a nuance of application that cannot be reduced to a soundbite. There are moments when Christians will be required prophetically to stress the antithesis between CRT and a biblical vision of justice, and other moments when a more wisdom-based, nuanced approach is called for. Not every individual engagement with CRT has to stress antithesis and fulfilment equally, but the dual emphasis should emerge clearly over time. We may find ourselves longing for a simpler account than this, but any reduction of this complexity is sub-biblical.

Hope

Finally, a profound distinctive of the biblical position, in contrast both to CRT and liberalism, is its positive message of hope. This hope is not merely a sense that justice will be done at some point in the future, but a way of inhabiting the complexities of racial injustice now in a way that neither merely laments them nor imagines they can be brushed under the carpet.

One of the most striking features of Derrick Bell’s work is its lack of hope for fundamental change. As a result, it loses a positive vision of a good, flourishing society (which has to be inferred as the mirror image of what it denounces). Meanwhile, it treats identity as what theologian

Charles Mathewes calls ‘apocalyptic’: fixed and completely transparent.⁵⁹ Identity, just like social conditions, is fixed. The tragedy of this situation is summed up in Bell’s description of the stance of Frantz Fanon, a major influence on CRT: ‘Fanon’s book was enormously pessimistic in a victory sense. He did not believe that modern structures, deeply poisoned with racism, could be overthrown. And yet he urged resistance.’⁶⁰

Liberalism does have a hope, but it is thin gruel. Hope is a necessary postulate, something that we have to have in order to make rational progress towards a better society, but it is highly speculative. The consensual, incremental reforms propelled by this anaemic hope leave many bitter and disillusioned, sharing Kimberly Jones’s bleak prognosis that ‘you can’t win’. The liberal discourse around justice and rights holds out hope for the individual to consider him- or herself righteous, not personally guilty of racism. But it lacks a vision for the sort of social reconciliation and flourishing that broad problems like racism require.

The Bible, by contrast, offers us a radical hope wedded to a predisposition to immediate action. It provides a vision for working towards forms of society that are beneficial for everyone, not just associations in which no-one is to blame or perpetual struggles of one group against another. Christians engage with issues of racial justice not in order to justify themselves, nor only in order to bewail their sin, but in hope that the aspirations of both critical race theory and classical liberalism will be transformatively, subversively fulfilled by the God in whose name the nations put their hope (Matthew 12:21).



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58 Michael Walzer, *In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

59 The theme is treated in both *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) and *A Theology of*

Public Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

60 Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, x.

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