Critical Race Theory in the Church

By Brandon Clay and Frost Smith on September 29, 2020

What is critical race theory (CRT), how are the ideas permeating the church, what does the Bible say about it, and what is the biblical response to racism in the church?

America is in turmoil these days. Protests have turned into riots in the street amid calls to "defund the police." Activists have set up so-called "autonomous zones" in Seattle and Portland where law enforcement dare not tread. Major corporations and major league sports support Black Lives Matter, a Marxist-led organization that has contributed to much of the street-level chaos in America. The unrest is palpable.

The implied drive behind this movement is racism. The traditional understanding of racism advocates that one ethnic group is better than other ethnic groups. Biblically speaking, racism is the sin of ethnic partiality or prejudice (James 2:8–9; Leviticus 19:15). As Christians, we know racism is wrong in society, as we are all one race in Adam (Acts 17:26), and especially within the church (Galatians 3:28). We should be concerned about racism and aim to think biblically about it. Owen Strachan's comments are helpful as we begin this overview: "we should be abundantly clear: racism and ethnocentrism are real and historical sins. They have not caused a little bit of division; across the entire world, in all eras of history, these iniquities have caused great pain and suffering." So racism is a real sin that should be repudiated by all believers in Christ.

But a movement that promotes riots, vandalism, and looting seems to be more than a march against racism. There are several factors contributing to strife in the streets, but one of the core ideologies fueling it is critical race theory. Critical race theory, an academic, now street-level philosophy, pits ethnic groups against each other in hopes of correcting historic inequalities. What is this theory? How is it affecting the evangelical church? And what's wrong with critical race theory? We aim to answer these three basic questions.

Note: The Bible teaches that all human beings are all members of one race. We are related to each other by our common ancestors, Adam and Eve. However, for argument's sake, I have opted to use so-called racial categories of "race," "black," and "white," since critical race theory depends upon these socially constructed concepts to make the arguments work. Consequently, it's also one of the inherent weaknesses of critical race theory since it depends upon unbiblical categories.

What Is Critical Race Theory (CRT)?
Neil Shenvi defines critical race theory (CRT) as "an ideology that divides the world into oppressed groups and their oppressors and aims to liberate the oppressed." Sometimes called "Cultural Marxism," CRT borrows concepts from

classical Marxism dividing the world into the "haves" and the "have nots" and attempts to right the wrongs of previous generations through a redistribution of wealth and power.

For instance, CRT teaches some groups, like blacks in America, have been historically oppressed by a dominant white culture. They argue American culture is enmeshed in "systemic racism," which is a rigged system where African-Americans cannot get justice or fair treatment in 21st century America. CRT also teaches that systemic racism started with slavery in the early centuries of American history and continues into the present time. Some given examples of systemic racism include disproportionate numbers of blacks being incarcerated, historically unfair housing regulations for potential black homebuyers, and police treating blacks unfairly or cruelly as in the case when George Floyd died while being roughly handled by a police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020.

Proponents of CRT ideology aim to ignore or deemphasize voices in the so-called "dominant" majority. This majority most notably includes older heterosexual white males, but it can also include young white males, white females, and others in the dominant majority, regardless of their individual actions. CRT also aims to elevate "voices of color" and other groups of people who have been historically marginalized. One requirement of CRT is that those minority voices must also promote socially progressive ideas.

Critical race theory originated in Europe in the early 20th century. Caleb Yarborough wrote, "critical race theory is derived from Critical Theory (CT), which originated in the Frankfurt School; a school of Marxist sociological and philosophical thought associated with the Institute for Social Research." CRT later infiltrated academic circles and has now permeated the broader culture through organizations like Black Lives Matter.

Two Implications of Critical Race Theory: Intersectionality & Privilege

All philosophies have inherent implications. Critical race theory is no exception. There are two important implications in CRT, the first of which is intersectionality. Oxford Dictionary defines *intersectionality* as, "The theory that various forms of discrimination centred on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, and other forms of identity, do not work independently but interact to produce particularized forms of social oppression."

According to intersectionality, multiple groups of people have been historically "oppressed" in Western society. Some are members of more than one oppressed

group. The more "oppressed groups" a person is a part of, the more "oppressed" they are in CRT. For instance, a black lesbian is oppressed while a straight (aka cisgender) white man is not. The reason CRT gives is the black lesbian is a member of three historically oppressed groups: she's a woman, she's gay, and she's black. She has high intersectionality and should be given more power; whereas a straight white man is a member of none of those historically oppressed groups. In CRT, he has no intersectionality and his power should be diminished.
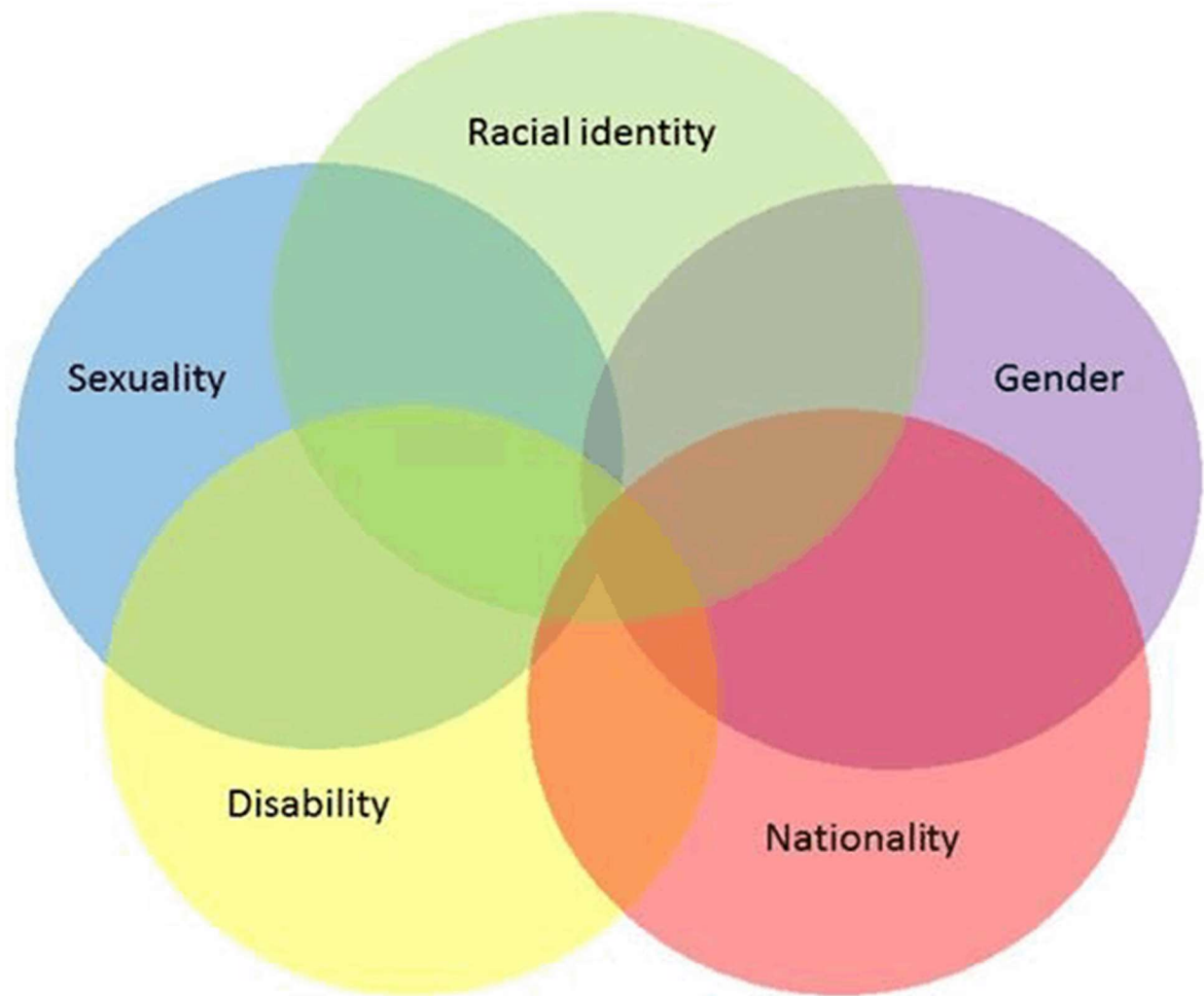
Intersectionality Illustration from Womankind.org.

A second implication to critical race theory is *privilege*. In CRT, the person who is not a member of an "oppressed" group of people is necessarily privileged. A "privileged" person enjoys benefits of being in the dominant group, such as social and economic opportunities historically not offered to those in oppressed groups.

You see, the ideology of CRT privilege arises in concepts like "white privilege." *White privilege* is considered to be where white people necessarily have received benefits that haven't always been offered to blacks (and other groups). So-called "white" voices are usually not considered helpful in the struggle for equity (equal outcomes), since white people don't or can't understand oppression in the same way a black person understands oppression. In CRT, those with privilege should give wealth, power, and influence to those in oppressed groups. This is why the group Black Lives Matter uses a black, raised fist as its symbol. It represents a call to black power.
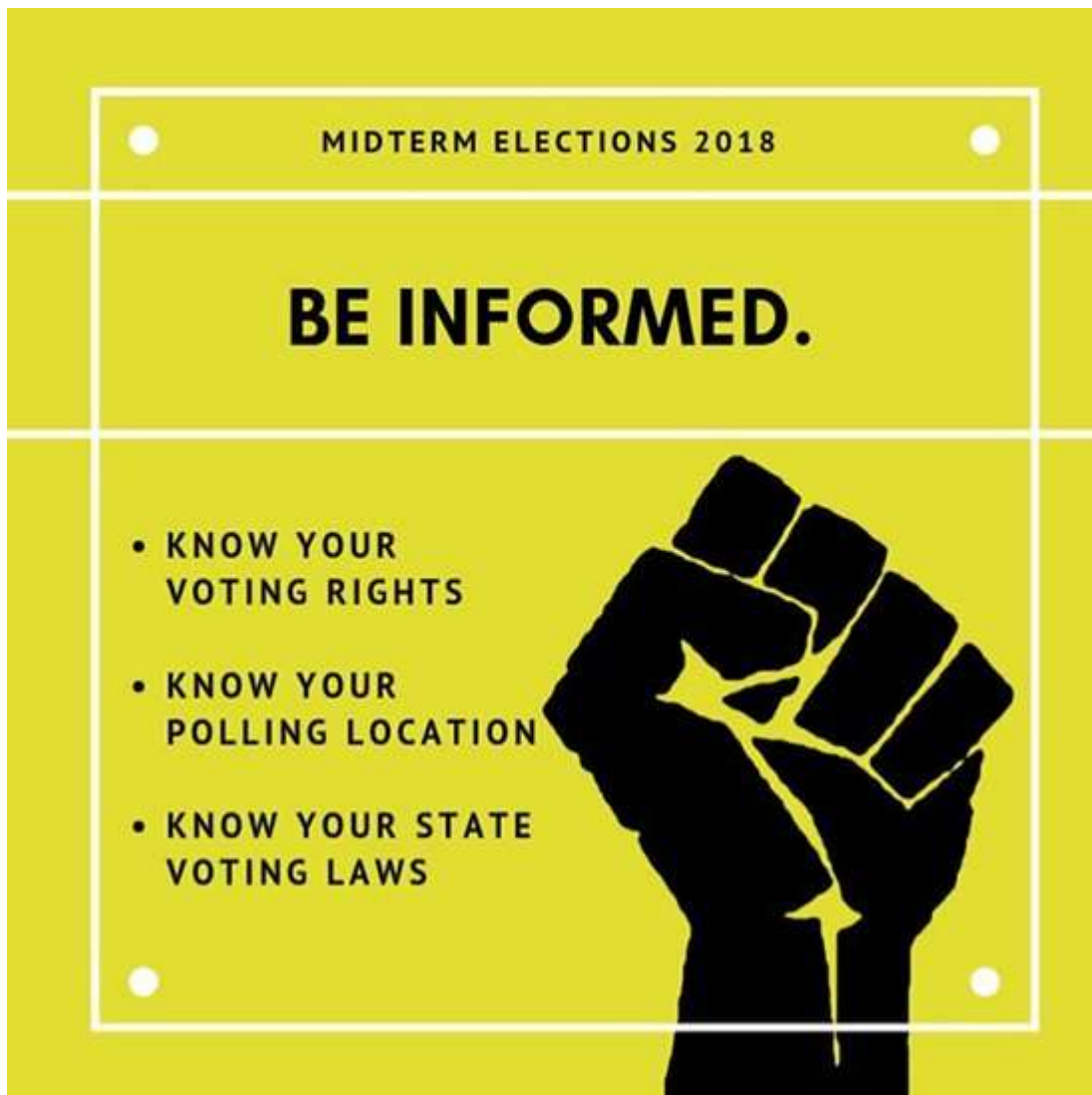

Image Credit: Black Lives Matter Instagram.

The Appeal of Critical Race Theory

Indeed, critical race theory has an inherent appeal to many people. For groups who have been historically downtrodden, CRT seems like a rational justification to understand why things are challenging in their situations and what can be done to correct social inequities. For instance, a black man may look to "systemic racism" as a rationale for why some police treat him differently than his white counterpart across town. There may be ample reason for the black man to consider racism as the reason for ill treatment. Perhaps the man saw his brother brutalized by some cops or knew some friends getting inhumanly treated by police over the years. And it's all driven home by his constant fear of getting stopped by law enforcement and suffering a similar fate–or worse. "Systemic racism" may seem like a viable explanation for why it seems that some police continue to abuse fellow black citizens.

Millions have flocked to critical race theory. Many have protested in the streets with legitimate concerns about racial issues, law enforcement tactics, healthcare affordability, and more. Enter CRT scholars and practitioners who try to both diagnose and treat the underlying racial inequities in society. They see corruption and persecution as an outworking of an insidious cancer consisting of privilege and racism. And they want to fix the problem. No wonder even some in the church, as those who should be leading the way in seeking justice (Micah 6:8), have fallen for CRT.

Examples of Critical Race Thinking in the Church

Critical Race Theory did not arise in the church, but that hasn't stopped some religious leaders from appropriating these concepts. This is just a sampling of how CRT influences leaders in the church.

Ally Henny, a religion writer with 20,000+ Twitter followers, wrote, "The cult of personality that has developed around certain theologians is evidence that white people don't believe anything that hasn't been thoroughly whitesplained by a white man." This tweet was followed up with, "Hit dogs holler. As evidenced by the response I've gotten to this post. Some of these folks don't want to be called in their nonsense."

According to Henny, white people with their "whitesplaining" are ignorant. ("Whitesplaining" is when a white person explains something in their presumed privilege and outside their area of personal experience.) She suggests that white people can't know what a black person knows. Henny implies that anyone who disagrees with her is like a whimpering dog and believes "nonsense." Henny's

perspective, though blatantly condescending, can be easily understood if you understand CRT.

Another example of CRT is from the Provost at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Matthew Hall. On a recent video, Hall confessed to his "racism" when he said: "I am a racist. If you think the worst thing someone can call you is a racist, then you aren't thinking biblically. I'm going to struggle with racism and white supremacy until the day I die and get a glorified body and a sanctified mind, because I am immersed in a culture where I benefit from racism all the time."

According to Dr. Hall, people (like him) are "racists." Hall does not mean he's a closet KKK-member, but he does mean white privilege is embedded in his decision-making and persona. This goes to show that Hall is being influenced by critical race theory, to such an extent, that he felt the need to confess his "racism" to the world. Keep in mind, Matthew Hall is currently the Provost at one of the world's largest seminaries and he teaches future Evangelical leaders.

A final example of CRT in the church is from Lisa Sharon Harper, another religion writer with 14,000+ Facebook followers. In a Facebook post, Harper disagreed with Evangelical pastor Tim Keller for commenting on race relations since he is white and out-of-touch with the real ills of society. Harper wrote, "How INCREDULOUSLY PRIVILEGED for Keller—a RICH WHITE MAN WHOSE MINISTRY TARGETS RICH PEOPLE—to fashion himself as the judge of whether or not injustice rises to the level of OPPRESSION!!! No!!!! The only ones with divine authority to define the bounds of oppression are the oppressed themselves!"

According to Harper, older white men shouldn't even open their mouths when it comes to racism. The only people that God has ordained to speak (note her use of the phrase, "divine authority") are those who have been historically oppressed. Harper illustrates CRT perfectly.

In all three of these examples from religious leaders, there's a common theme: voices of color must be promoted, and dominant culture voices should diminish. For Ally Henny, dominant voices don't understand minority voices. Matthew Hall, the self-confessed "racist," has tacitly surrendered his own authority so other, more progressive voices can be heard. In Lisa Sharon Harper's case, older white leaders shouldn't comment on racial issues, and black leaders like Harper should

be leading instead. These examples are not from secular university professors. These individuals speak as leaders in the church.

The Bible and What's Wrong with Critical Race Theory

So what is so wrong about critical race theory? First off, we must acknowledge that truth is not determined by groups of people. Critical race theoreticians have shifted the center of truth away from objective standards to the subjective perspective of what are considered oppressed groups. To CRT advocates, truth is not determined objectively outside of themselves. Instead, truth is determined experientially by historically oppressed groups of people; thus, different groups of people can have different "truths" in this view.

But that's not how truth works. Truth is true outside of anyone's perspective. Two plus two equals four, regardless of the melanin in your skin or any of your past experiences. Bowling balls fall from airplanes regardless of what anyone believes about gravity. Truth is located outside of a person's perspective: it's not integrated into divisive racial, social, sexual, income, or gender identities. **This is the fundamental problem with critical race theory.**

Christians must remember where truth comes from: the <u>Bible</u>. God's Word is always true (John 17:17). It is the foundation for all truth claims. It doesn't matter if older white males in a so-called domineering culture believe it. It also doesn't matter if young black lesbians don't believe it. Believing or not believing the Bible has no bearing on the truthfulness of biblical propositions. The reason is, truth doesn't reside in a person's perspective: truth resides outside any group's shared experience. Ultimately, truth resides in <u>Jesus</u>, not in "oppressed" groups. That is why critical race theory finds no footing in the Bible and should not in the church.

A Better, Biblical Response to Racism in the Church

In fairness, critical race theory has highlighted a problem in our fallen world: racism. Some people have suffered real and substantial injustice. This adversity doesn't alter ultimate truth, but it does elucidate a perspective that not everyone shares.

At times, Christians have not been as empathetic toward the plight of our fellow image bearers (*Genesis 1:27*). Some professed believers have gone so far as to justify racial bias, slavery, segregation, apartheid, and more using the Bible. Though much of this behavior happened in the past, the offense should be acknowledged. This misuse of the Bible was wrong and it violates the Scriptural

admonition for Christians to love our neighbors—regardless of their shade of skin (Mark 12:31).

So how should the church respond to real racism that many fellow believers have endured? Instead of adopting secular methods to fix spiritual problems, Christians should look to the Scripture to address sinful behavior. Thankfully, God has given believers tools to combat racial injustice.

The term "one another" (Greek: ἀλλήλων) is used over 90 times in the New Testament. This phrase is one way God shows us how we should work with our brothers and sisters who have been mistreated, acknowledging and correcting, if needed, known injustice. As Christians, we ought to care for one another regardless of skin shade, social status, nationality, disability, or personal struggles. We should . . .

- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Give preference to one another (Romans 12:10)
- Stimulate one another to good deeds (Hebrews 10:24)
- Bear with one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)

Application: Critical Race Theory—A False Worldview

At its foundation, critical race theory elevates sinful man's word above God's Word. Critical race theory spawns envy, division, and power struggles. No wonder there's so much unrest and chaos in the streets—it's what CRT espouses. These ideas are diametrically opposed to the biblical virtues of contentment (Philippians 4:11–12), unity (John 17:21), and humility (Colossians 3:12). And since CRT is a Marxist-motivated ideology, it is atheistic. At best, it ignores the God who made the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). This is how we know critical race theory is not biblical. Instead, CRT is a false worldview.

Our ministry's founder, Ken Ham, recently wrote about critical race theory on Facebook:

"Ultimately, the only way to deal with race issues is to proclaim the truth of God's Word and the gospel, beginning in Genesis. Until people believe God's Word revealing the true history of the human race, what our problem is (sin), and what the solution is in Jesus Christ, race issues will never be dealt with as they need to be. The fact is all humans belong to one race (Adam's race), we are all one

family, and all are sinners in need of salvation. We need to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31) and we need to be reminded of how Jesus taught us as Christians to pray, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12)."

So when leaders in your church start promoting "critical race theory," "intersectionality," or "white privilege"—or any extrabiblical ideology—remember the words of Jesus, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14:6). Christians must measure everything against the Word of God. Truth isn't defined by any ethnic group. Truth is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ revealed in God's Word. Because of that, believers should point people towards the Savior. A broken world provides many opportunities for that, as well as for seeking justice and providing mercy as we are able along the way.

But Christians must never lose sight of the most important need of others: to become part of the most ethnically diverse and sanctified gathering in history—a "great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).