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## Grace Fellowship Position Paper on Critical Theory

### DOCUMENT SUMMARY

We believe critical theory is incompatible with Christianity because it teaches contrary to Scripture regarding epistemology, identity, morality, authority, and justice.

### WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY?

Critical theory is a postmodern ideology that views all human relationships through a lens of power. It has roots in the so-called Frankfurt School of 1920s Germany and was exported to the United States prior to the Second World War when the philosophers associated with that movement immigrated to the USA and integrated into Columbia University establishing the Institute for Social Research.<sup>1</sup>

The word “critical” in critical theory should not be understood to mean analytical in the traditional sense, referring instead to the critique of all social institutions using the assumptions of critical theory. However, those who espouse critical theory claim *it* cannot be critiqued. In fact, according to its proponents, the only reason someone criticizes critical theory is because they are seeking to maintain their power.<sup>2</sup> Critical theory is therefore a non-falsifiable belief system. While there are broader, more academic, applications of critical theory, here we will focus on critical theory’s manifestation in contemporary culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonner, S.E. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 2-4

<sup>2</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 59-60.

Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer describe it this way:

*Contemporary critical theory...divides the world into oppressed groups and their oppressors along lines of race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, age, weight, and a host of other identity markers.*<sup>3</sup>

In seeking to promote critical theory, modern advocates have popularized phrases such as “white privilege,” “white fragility,” “colorblind racism,” “heteronormativity,” “cisgender,” “ableism,” and “intersectionality” to describe what they view as expressions of oppressive power and privilege.

Below are some foundational principles of contemporary critical theory:

- A person’s access to truth, moral status and obligations are determined by one’s identity with either an oppressor or oppressed group. A person’s association with a group will either hinder or enable one’s access to truth. Oppression is defined broadly in terms of “hegemonic power” where the oppressor group has a dominant share of power and consequently will define norms, values and expectations for the rest of society.<sup>4</sup>
- An oppressor’s perception of reality and truth is distorted by their participation in the power structures - this distortion is rooted in their conscious or subconscious protection of their power supremacy by maintaining status quo.<sup>5</sup>
- Oppressed groups have access to a more refined version of truth since they are not influenced by power. Their “lived experience” gives them access to truth not available to their oppressors. Further, their “lived experience” is not open to evaluation or analysis since any method of doing that is automatically corrupted by power structures or Western constructs, closing any opportunity for challenging the claims of a critical theorist. In other words, critical theory is not open to critique and is self-certifying.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Neil Shenvi, [\*Engaging Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement.\*](#)

<sup>4</sup> Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>6</sup> Barbour, K., “Embodied Ways of Knowing”, *Waikato Journal of Education*, 2004, pp. 227, 230.

- Critical theorists identify many kinds of oppression in society. For example, sexism, heterosexism, racism, ableism, etc. Oppression is found within the context of gender, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, ethnicity, etc.<sup>7</sup>
- The “lived experience” or access to undistorted truth of the oppressed is enhanced if one is part of multiple oppressed groups, a concept known as “intersectionality”.<sup>8</sup>
- A person can be considered an oppressor even if they have not individually abused their power. Because of their association with the dominant group, they are guilty of oppression.<sup>9</sup>
- Dominant groups dictate societal norms and those who are in a minority group are considered as abnormal or outcasts.<sup>10</sup>
- A person can be both an oppressor and oppressed simultaneously for example, white females are an oppressed minority as a female, but an oppressor as white people.
- A theme of liberation runs through critical theory, emphasizing liberation from oppressors. This is what is meant by “social justice”.<sup>11</sup>

## CRITICAL THEORY & CHRISTIANITY

Much has been written on the incompatibility of critical theory with Christianity and it’s not our intent to reproduce all of that in this short document. For links to some of the broader discussion on this topic, see the suggested resources at the end.

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<sup>7</sup> Tatum, B., “The Complexity of Identity: ‘Who Am I?’”, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, P., “Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2012, Vol 26, No. 2, p. 455.

<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, P. “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, Wadsworth, Belmont, 1992, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> McClintock, M. “How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 483.

However, you don't have to know everything about a belief system to evaluate it in light of scripture. For example, once you know that the Jehovah's Witness religion believes Christ is a created being, you know the belief system is incompatible with Christianity even if it contains elements of truth in other of its teachings. If the pillars that hold up a belief system stand in opposition to the Word of God, we cannot expect it to lead us to truth or produce godly fruit.

Neil Shenvi in his book *Engaging critical theory and the Social Justice Movement* writes:

*"Contemporary critical theory and Christianity conflict not merely with respect to a few minor details, but with respect to basic questions of epistemology, identity, morality, and authority."*

It is these four areas, as well as the area of justice, that concern us as well.

## **Epistemology**

Critical theory does not approach truth the way the Bible does. Epistemology is the study of what we know and how we know it. Critical theory, because it views everything through the lens of power and oppression, views truth claims as social constructs created to maintain the power of the dominant culture. To someone steeped in critical theory, there can be no such thing as objectivity:

*"One of the key contributions of critical theorists concerns the production of knowledge.... These scholars argue that a key element of social injustice involves the claim that particular knowledge is objective, neutral, and universal. An approach based on critical theory calls into question the idea that objectivity is desirable or even possible."*<sup>12</sup>

French postmodernist philosopher Michele Foucault *"argued that truth claims were merely power grabs; others' condemnation of his homosexuality was only*

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<sup>12</sup>Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 29

*the straight majority view, powerfully and arbitrarily imposed on a victimized homosexual minority for purposes of social control.”<sup>13</sup>*

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that objective, universal truth exists apart from human beings and is revealed most clearly through Jesus Christ and his Word ([John 1:14](#), [14:6](#)). This truth applies to all people at all times in all circumstances ([Acts 17:30](#)). It is not a creation of those in power (though it can be abused by them) but is revealed to us by God himself ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)) and is to be heard and obeyed ([Deuteronomy 12:28](#)).

Obviously, if all truth claims are simply power plays by the dominant culture, that would include the truth claims of scripture. The idea of a divinely inspired, inerrant, written word of God to which everyone is accountable is a foreign concept in critical theory.

*“To critical theorists...totalizing, comprehensive, exclusive claims are utterly unacceptable. From the perspective of contemporary critical theory, God is the Ultimate Oppressor.” - Neil Shenvi*

## **Identity**

Critical theory puts everyone into one of two groups, oppressed and oppressor.

You know which of those two groups you are in by the sub-group to which you belong. In critical theory, our primary identity is at the group level and every oppressed group has a corresponding oppressor group or groups:

*For every social group, there is an opposite group... the primary groups that we name here are: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality.”<sup>14</sup>*

Bruce Ashford of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in the United Kingdom speaking of Critical Race Theory (a sub-category of critical theory) says:

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, Peter. The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity's Greatest Threat (Kindle Locations 519-521). Kirkdale Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 44

*Rather than emphasizing that the truest thing about human persons is their relation to and accountability before God, CRT claims that the truest thing about human beings is that they are embedded in human groupings that form their identity.*<sup>15</sup>

Christianity puts everyone into one of two groups as well, those in Christ and those outside Christ ([Matthew 25:31-33](#)). But rather than seeing those in the other group as enemies or oppressors, we're to see them as image bearers of God who need the gospel ([Luke 6:27](#), [Romans 12:14](#)). And if we're believers, our primary identity is as a follower of Christ. This doesn't erase differences between us but it means those differences are incidental to our status and unity as brothers and sisters of the King ([Galatians 3:28](#)).

Critical theory encourages us to treat our brother or sister based not on the condition of their heart but based on externals, something God condemns ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)).

## **Morality**

Critical theory has its own morality that differs from Christian morality. Scott Aniol of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary says:

*"Put simply, critical theory assesses goodness or badness based on race, class, and power. The Bible, in contrast, assesses goodness or badness based on conformity of actions to God and his moral Law."*<sup>16</sup>

The Bible makes no moral distinction between those with power and those without power. People in either category can be good, or they can be evil. Justice requires having the same measure for the great and the small, the poor and the rich ([Deuteronomy 1:17](#), [Leviticus 19:15](#)). The Bible makes clear that all men and women are sinners. No one is without guilt before God no matter their

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<sup>15</sup> Critical Race Theory: Plundering the Egyptians or Worshiping Ba'al? - Public Discourse ([thepublicdiscourse.com](http://thepublicdiscourse.com))  
[Critical Race Theory: Plundering the Egyptians or Worshiping Ba'al? - Public Discourse \(thepublicdiscourse.com\)](http://thepublicdiscourse.com)

<sup>16</sup> A Concise Biblical Evaluation of critical theory [A Concise Biblical Evaluation of Critical Theory | Religious Affections Ministries: Conservative Christianity, Worship, Culture, Aesthetics, Classical Education, Homeschooling, Family](#)

race, class, gender, level of oppression or any other category ([Ecclesiastes 7:20](#), [Romans 3:23](#)).

Also, since critical theory evaluates good and evil based on whether someone is or is not in an oppressed group, many things the Bible calls sin are embraced as good by critical theory simply because those practicing them are among the oppressed:

*“The ethics of contemporary critical theory are rooted in power dynamics. As a result, oppressed people can engage in speech, behaviors, or attitudes that would be immediately recognized as sinful were they indulged by oppressors.” - Neil Shenvi*

“Antiracist” advocate Ibram X. Kendi, equates failure to affirm homosexuality and transgenderism with support of racism:

*“To be queer antiracist is to understand the privileges of my cisgender, of my masculinity, of my heterosexuality, of their intersections. To be queer antiracist is to serve as an ally to transgender people, to intersex people, to women, to the non-gender-conforming, to homosexuals, to their intersections, meaning listening, learning, and being led by their equalizing ideas, by their equalizing policy campaigns, by their power struggle for equal opportunity.”<sup>17</sup>*

As Christians we’re called to treat those involved in things like sexual sin as image-bearers of God and seek to do good to them by sharing the Gospel but we are prohibited from calling good that which God calls evil ([Isaiah 5:20](#)). Critical theory demands we do the latter in the name of fighting oppression.

## **Authority**

Critical theory does not share the Bible’s view of the value and purpose of authority. critical theory sees all authority as problematic, designed only to maintain the power of oppressors. Consider how Sensoy and DiAngelo speak about male leadership. Note particularly what’s said about that in the church and the home:

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<sup>17</sup> Taking on the Revolutionary Program of Ibram X. Kendi – Denny Burk [Taking on the Revolutionary Program of Ibram X. Kendi – Denny Burk](#)

*“Patriarchy is the belief in the inherent superiority of men and the creation of institutions based on that belief. Examples of patriarchal ideology worldwide are: a male god; the father as the head of the household; males as authority in all social realms such as law, government, religion and culture; women as inherently inferior to men and the property of men.”*<sup>18</sup>

While the Bible does not teach the “inherent superiority of men,” it does teach that men and women have different, God-ordained, roles and that men are called by God to lead in the family and the church ([1 Corinthians 11:3](#), [Ephesians 5:22](#), [1 Peter 5:5](#), [1 Timothy 3:2-5](#)). Critical theory classifies this as “patriarchy,” something akin to racism that must be eliminated from society.

Scripture also commands us to honor those in authority and tells us the civil government is ordained by God to reward good and punish evil. In fact, Paul says in [Romans 13:1](#) that all authority is ordained by God. That doesn’t mean that all those *in* authority are good, but it does mean human authority is God’s plan.

Critical theory denies the necessity and goodness of God-ordained authority.

## **Justice**

Finally, critical theory does not define justice the way the Bible does. Justice is important to the Lord and therefore its pursuit is not an option for the Christian (Deuteronomy 6:19, Psalm 106:3, Micah 6:8). Nothing here should be taken to minimize the importance of justice or the duty of the Christian to pursue it. However, our contention is that critical theory is not the method we should use to either define or pursue justice.

In critical theory, justice, often called “social justice,” is achieved by identifying the oppressed and the oppressor and doing whatever is necessary to equalize the outcomes of the two groups. Any discrepancy between them is always and only attributed to injustice of some kind be it racism, sexism, heteronormativity, etc.

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<sup>18</sup> Sensoy, O and DiAngelo, R, Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education, Teachers College Press, New York, 2017, p. 103



Scott David Allen in his book *Why Social Justice is not Biblical Justice* describes “social justice” this way:

*“Deconstructing traditional systems and structures deemed to be oppressive and redistributing power and resources from oppressors to their victims in the pursuit of equality of outcome.”*

This leads to a pragmatic approach where even things the Bible calls unjust are labeled just when they achieve the desired result. For example, Ibram X. Kendi says:

*“The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”*<sup>19</sup>

Justice in scripture, however, requires that the same standard be applied to everyone (Leviticus 19:15). Injustice in the present is never a remedy to injustice in the past. Scripture is also clear that justice is not measured by the differences between people but by the law of God. Again, from Scott David Allen:

*(Justice is) Conformity to God’s moral standard as revealed in the Ten Commandments and the Royal Law: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Justice involves giving people their due as image-bearers of God. It also involves the work of God, and God-ordained authorities (including parents in the home, elders in the church, teachers in the school, and civil authorities in the state) impartially rendering judgment, righting wrongs, and meting out punishment for lawbreaking.*

For these reasons and many others, we see critical theory not as a complement to the gospel but at odds with the gospel, not a useful tool but an unhelpful incursion of the world’s thinking into the church.

## THE FRUIT OF CRITICAL THEORY

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<sup>19</sup> Kendi, Ibram X., [How to Be an Antiracist](#), p.19

As critical theory has moved from the university into the corporate HR department, the elementary school classroom, the military, the church and beyond it has produced fruit in keeping with the beliefs outlined above ([Matthew 12:33](#)).

Again, many things could be cited here but our biggest concern is divisiveness. The apostle Paul lists “division” among the fruit of the flesh, ([Galatians 5:20](#)) and in [Romans 16:17](#) he admonishes us to watch out for those who cause it with teaching contrary to sound doctrine. Critical theory, by its nature creates division. It, in fact, *requires* division - oppressed versus oppressor, black versus white, “gay” versus straight, able versus disabled, etc. Where no division exists, critical theory says people are simply blind and must, via the tenets of critical theory, be made to see it.

Jonathan Church commenting on Robin DiAngelo’s PhD dissertation writes:

*“The central aim of Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies is not to determine whether racism is at work in a situation but how. They set out to fix the problem before attempting to identify it because, for whiteness scholars, racism is anywhere and everywhere.”*<sup>20</sup>

Everyone is either an oppressor or oppressed and therefore everyone is either a victim or a victimizer based on their membership in a group. If you set out to create division, you could hardly find a better model for achieving it.

Because critical theory sees oppression as the greatest evil and all cultural institutions as tools of oppression, it seeks to tear down and destroy those institutions, not to encourage and build up. ([1 Thessalonians 5:11](#)) This is seen in the drive to “problematize” everything:

*Queer Theory problematizes and challenges rigid identity categories, norms of sexuality and gender and the oppression and violence that such hegemonic norms justify... Queer theory follows and expands upon feminist theory by refusing the belief that sexuality and gender identity are essentialist categories determined by*

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<sup>20</sup> The Intellectual Fraud of Robin DiAngelo’s “White Fragility” - The Logical Liberal [The Intellectual Fraud Of Robin DiAngelo’s “White Fragility” – Citizen Obsessed](#)

*biology that can thus be empirically judged by fixed standards of morality and “truth.”*<sup>21</sup>

*Every possible cultural product...must be examined, critiqued, and problematized to the full extent that Theory indicates. This imperative therefore hijacks the epistemological and ethical engine of liberal societies and turns them into dysfunctional critical ones. It is in this vein that they attempt to seize every means of cultural production and turn them to critical theory – James Lindsay*<sup>22</sup>

*[Judith] Butler’s work is initially framed by a concern with the unproblematized identity category “women” that serves as the subject of feminism. Not only have white, straight feminists excluded women of color and lesbians from the universal concept of “women” but also they have not taken seriously Foucault’s insights that all identities are effects of power regimes. – Barbara Applebaum*<sup>23</sup>

*"If racism is systemic, then, if you're not tearing down the system that is creating these disparities, then not-racist is actually racist. And you've got to move beyond that to anti-racism, which means that you're constantly problematizing ... being critical in the oppressor-oppressed mode and looking for areas in the system that are creating disparate or unequal outcomes, and fighting against that in order to get equal outcomes," – Voddie Baucham*<sup>24</sup>

We dare not assume the church will be immune from this division should she embrace critical theory. For these reasons and many others, we do not view critical theory as a useful tool for the church but a great danger to her unity and a hindrance to the task she has been given by the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Course Syllabus, Intro to Queer Theory, University of Massachusetts, Spring 2017 [Microsoft Word - WGSS392Q.IntroQueerTheory.Syllabus.docx \(umass.edu\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Problematize - New Discourses](#)

<sup>23</sup> Applebaum, Barbara. *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy*. Lexington Books, 2010, p. 56

<sup>24</sup> Staff, B. T. V. (2021, May 24). 'They can problematize ANYTHING': Voddie Baucham dismantles the lies of 'antiracism'. TheBlaze.

<https://www.theblaze.com/shows/glenn-beck-podcast/if-obamas-not-woke-enough-for-you-nobody-is-voddie-baucham-warns-theres-no-end-to-what-critical-race-theorists-can-problematize>.

# CONCLUSION

In the midst of the Beatitudes in Luke chapter 6, Jesus pronounces a series of “woes” on those who exhibit certain characteristics. Among them is:

*“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” - [Luke 6:26](#)*

This is not a warning to people who are thought well of because they’re nice or friendly but to people whose beliefs align so much with the world that they are thought well of by the world. They are liked because they support what the world supports.

Throughout the history of the church there has been the temptation to adapt church teaching to the culture in order to seem relevant or be thought well of. Paul warns against this:

*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. - [Colossians 2:8](#)*

These philosophies have varied across time and place but wherever the Lord places his church, she is called to stand boldly for truth in the face of whatever philosophy stands in opposition to the gospel and sound doctrine that leads to joy in the Lord and a life that spreads the fame of God.

We believe in our day critical theory is one of those philosophies about which the church is called to speak boldly and clearly.

# RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

[A Concise Biblical Evaluation of Critical Theory | Religious Affections Ministries: Conservative Christianity, Worship, Culture, Aesthetics, Classical Education, Homeschooling, Family](#)

[Can we eat the meat and spit out the bones of CRT? – Denny Burk](#)

[Critical Theory Within Evangelicalism – Neil Shenvi – Apologetics \(shenviapologetics.com\)](#)

[Critical Theory – All Content – Neil Shenvi – Apologetics \(shenviapologetics.com\)](#)

[Critical Race Theory: Civil Rights Upside Down \(str.org\)](#)

[Fault Lines - Voddie T. Bauchum Jr. \(voddiebaucham.org/fault-lines/\)](#)

[What Wokeness is Not, and What it is - Owen Strachan - patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2020/10/7723/\)](#)