

Thinking Christianly on Race

Tonight's topic is one that our culture is especially sensitive to right now. The topic of race and racism in America seems to have only one possible answer allowed in the common discussion forums: that America is a deeply racist country and that our entire system needs to be restructured. My goal tonight is not to defend America as a non-racist nation or anything of that sort. If you want that sort of analysis you can go to conservative thinkers like Ben Shapiro or Dennis Prager. I am interested in a Christian perspective on this discussion.

Rather, my goal tonight is twofold. 1) I want to present our culture's common understanding of race and racism so that we understand what we are dealing with. I then want to follow that up with 2) A Christian perspective on race and racism and how we should engage in this discussion.

Our culture's common understanding of race and racism today

There are some complicated sounding terms that have entered our culture today and particularly this discussion of race. As I hope to show it has much more wide reaching implications, but we need to understand what and who we are conversing with if we are to engage with our culture effectively.

To begin with I would like to recommend some resources if you would like to dig into this issue for yourself. The first, and in my opinion the best, on this subject is a book called *Cynical Theories* by James A Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose. Their book is a great analysis of many of the concepts that I will be talking about. Fair warning, neither of them are believers. James Lindsay is actually a vocal atheist, but he has become one of the subject matter experts on one of the topics I will be addressing tonight. Some other books on the subject as it relates to the concept of social justice are *Social Justice vs. Biblical Justice* by E. Calvin Beisner, *Why Social Justice is Not Biblical Justice* by Scott D. Allen, and *Social Justice Goes To Church* by Jon Harris. That last one explains the history of how the social justice concepts I will be referring to got into the vocabulary and theology of mainstream Christianity.

So with that, the first question I want to ask is: How does our culture want us to think about race? The answer to that is most often found in the term Critical Race Theory. Many of our own church leaders in evangelical Christianity, including some in the SBC, have said that Critical Race Theory can be a helpful tool for understanding race and racism. Is this true? Personally, I don't think so. I believe Critical Race Theory is antithetical to the gospel and not compatible. If you accept one you must reject the other. Why do I think this?

To start with I want to show you a clip shared in the past few years from a diversity training that incorporates Critical Race Theory in its teaching. Let's take a look.

Ok, so at the end of that, I think it's fair to say that most of us, or at least myself, would call the instructor a racist for saying that all white people are racist. That is the classic definition

of racism, viewing someone else or a group of people as inferior simply because of their skin color, nation of origin, or ancestry. However, what is important to understand, and I cannot emphasize this enough, is that if you were to confront this person and accuse her of racism she would call you a racist for calling her racist. In other words, she doesn't believe she is a racist. She believes what she is saying is true and this is because she defines racism differently than you or I would. So we are going to unpack what they are actually talking about, because they are using the same terms but different definitions.

So what is Critical Race Theory? To begin with, Critical race Theory holds that race is a social construct that was created to maintain white privilege and white supremacy. Now on the surface, as far as Christian teaching is concerned, there is nothing wrong with that claim. We believe as Christians that we are all made in the image of God, as the song goes "red and yellow black and white, they are precious in His sight." We believe that we are all descended from the same initial couple, Adam and Eve and that we all share humanity through being descendants of them. So skin color or ancestry doesn't matter and is thus a social construct. True enough, but Critical Race Theory goes deeper than that. However, even by their own proponents they acknowledge that it is uniquely radical in its approach. As described by proponents Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic: "Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law."¹ Indeed many of these concepts are considered white supremacist by their definition.

I am not sure if you have seen this infographic, but this was put out by the Smithsonian and it tries to helpfully outline things that are considered part of "white culture". The implication is that these ideas lean toward white supremacy. In case you can't read some of them they are things most of would be considered good such as "intent counts" when talking about justice, "delayed gratification", "objective, rational and linear thinking". Most of us would consider these things good, and not necessarily based in white culture, but just because they are biblical ideas that work. But the implication here is that these ideas can be discarded simply because they are part of "white culture".

So what else does Critical Race Theory teach? What does it assume? As listed by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic:

- 1) "Racism is ordinary, not aberrational" – in other words it is the everyday experience of people of color in the United States
- 2) "A system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group." – meaning white supremacy is systemic and benefits white people

¹ As quoted in *Cynical Theories*, Kindle edition, Location 1840

- 3) As mentioned earlier that race is a social construct and that intersectionality and antiessentialism are needed to address this.
- 4) A “unique voice of color” exists and “minority status.... Brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism”. In other words if you are in a minority racial class you know racism when you see it.

As the authors of *Cynical Theories* sum up critical race theory: “Racism is present everywhere and always, and persistently works against people of color, who are aware of this, and for the benefit of white people, who tend not to be, as is their privilege.”

You can see why the authors of this book titled this chapter “Critical Race Theory: ending racism by seeing it everywhere.” I did mention one term that I think is important to define and comes a lot in these types of social justice discussions. The term “intersectionality”, what does it mean? Intersectionality is a concept first described by critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw. It began as a tool that lets someone discover something about themselves but has since become a practice. She asks us to imagine a roadway intersection and see that there are multiple types of prejudicial bias that can “hit” an individual with two or more marginalized identities. Now you might think that this would inevitably reduce any individual to just that, an atomized individual, but this misunderstands the point of intersectionality which is to view these individuals by the intersections of their *group* identities. As the writers of *Cynical Theories* state “Even if a person were a unique mix of marginalized identities, thus intersectionally a unique individual, she would be understood through each and all of those group identities....She would not be understood as an individual”.²

All of this may sound quite strange to us, but it is all a logical outworking of the foundational beliefs that they adopt which is based in postmodern thinking. The two most important tenets of postmodern theory that apply to our discussion of Critical Race Theory here are simply these two:

- 1) The Postmodern Knowledge Principle: Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is even possible and that truth is only true for specific groups or cultures that call it that. In other words what is true for one person or group may not be true for another person or group.
- 2) The Postmodern Political principle: Society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies which decide what can be known and how.

Now you may have noticed that those two tenets conflict with one another. If we cannot actually know what is true than how can we know that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies? All of this is hopelessly self-contradictory. These people believe that genuine knowledge is impossible or near so, that what group you belong to determines your ability to discern truths, and that power is all that matters. So for instance, you may say something

² *Cynical Theories*, Location 2070

completely innocuous like “do you need help with that package?” and if the person is of another race or minority race according to Critical Race Theory they would be justified in saying “you just want to help cause you think I can’t do it cause I’m black.” The standpoint is all that matters.

As the writers of Cynical Theories write, and I will quote them at length here, “Interpreting everything as racist and saying so almost constantly is unlikely to produce the desired results in white people (or for minorities). It could even undermine antiracist activism by creating skepticism and indignation and thus producing a reluctance to cooperate with worthwhile initiatives to overcome racism. Some studies have already shown that diversity courses, in which members of dominant groups are told that racism is everywhere and that they themselves perpetuate it, have resulted in increased hostility towards marginalized groups. It is bad psychology to tell people who do not believe they are racist – who may even actively despise racism – that there is nothing they can do to stop themselves from being racist- and then ask them to help you. It is even less helpful to tell them that even their own good intentions are proof of their latent racism. Worst of all is to set up double-binds, like telling them that if they notice race it is because they are racist, but if they don’t notice race it’s because their privilege affords them the luxury of not noticing race, which is racist.....Such attitudes tear at the fabric that holds contemporary societies together.”³

Now, please keep in mind, that the discussion is far more involved than what I have laid out here. The development of Critical Race Theory is a long and sordid tale that the books I have recommended can shed some light on, and if you have time I would encourage you to look at and read those resources as they will do a far better job of outlining it than the short time I have here tonight. But you can already see how this sheds light on many of the conversations we have been having culturally, one example being police shootings. Inevitably what happens when these conversations arise is that some unfortunate person of black heritage gets shot by a police officer. The next thing to happen is an immediate accusation of racism. Those who defend the police will point out what the suspect was doing that might have given the police pause and put them on edge. This is followed by accusations of racism on the part of the police, many times without acknowledging the information laid out by the facts of the case. Now, please don’t misunderstand me, I am not saying that there are no racist police shootings. Of course that’s not true. I think there is evidence to indicate that that can and does happen unfortunately as horrible as that is. My point is simply to say that because we have two sides of people who hold to radically different conceptions of racism there is really no conversation that can be had about the issue. Those who hold to Critical Race Theory, like the group Black Lives Matter, inevitably will call a shooting of a black person racist simply because it appeared racist to certain black individuals and therefore, according to postmodern standpoint theory is considered racist. This is no way to have discussion or come to any sort of agreement. And that is the point, postmodernism and Critical Race Theory are at their cores, deeply deconstructive

³ *Cynical Theories*, Locations 2178 - 2199

philosophies that leave no constructive way to build or solve issues other than to tear down the systems they critique entirely.

A Christian view of Race and Racism

So now that we understand somewhat how our culture wants us to talk about race, let's see what the Bible says about it. First of all, we go back to the creation narrative: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.' So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female." Genesis 1:26-27 (CSB)

From that passage we can see that all man is made in God's image. This really can be interpreted (and I think does) mean that there is only really one race, the human race. So when we try to subdivide people based on their skin color or ancestry and say "Oh that's a separate race." That's not biblical. This is further enforced if we look at Acts 17:26 which says "From one man he has made very nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live." (CSB)

That's a far more biblical description, God created every *nationality* from the one man. It does not say separate races. All of what we would call "races" are really just different nationalities or ancestries that all share a common ancestry back to Adam. In this way we can somewhat sympathize with the argument from Critical Race Theorists that Race is a social construct that has been used to oppress people, but there is not much else we can agree on.

We can further see what was articulated in Genesis reemphasized in Galatians 5:28 "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, since you are all one in Christ Jesus." Now that is talking about how God views all of his children as equally valuable regardless of origin or background, but it still illustrates the point that no one human being is more valuable than another human being. Since we are all made in the image of God all human life is inherently precious and is to be protected, though there are provisions in God's law which allow for cases of capital punishment which we will explore in a future talk.

Prejudice based on nationality is not something that is new to the human race. As I am sure most of us are aware, the Jews held Gentiles in very low regard. This was not so much a racial thing as it was a cultural and set apart thing according to the commandments of God. At least that's what it was supposed to be. But similar to how the Jews looked down on Gentiles and Gentiles looked down on Jews, we have similar prejudices that arise in our human mindsets in various different ways. One of these is race based. But similar to when Peter is told to no longer view any person as common or unclean (Acts 10:28) we should not look down on anyone based on their ancestry.

Indeed in Acts 17:26 it says “From one man He has made very nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live.” So the natural question arises, if God has appointed these nationalities and their jurisdictions, should we not respect that as believers? Each of us is uniquely and wonderfully made by God and our ancestry is part of that creation.

Now, the question arises where does this conflict with Critical Race Theory? I will point out a few here:

- 1) One of the tenets of critical race theory you’ll recall was “A “unique voice of color” exists and “minority status.... Brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism”. In other words if you are in a minority racial class you know racism when you see it.
 - a. Voddie Baucham has a wonderful talk on this called “Ethnic Gnosticism” which you can find on Youtube. Though that is a fancy sounding term it is brilliant in its simplicity. It is basically the idea that if you are of a certain heritage then you know when you are being derided and looked down on or being discriminated against better than someone who is not that race or heritage. He goes on to completely annihilate this perspective by pointing out that intent matters in our sharing of ideas. If someone shares something that you consider racist but they didn’t intend it that way, then you should be looking to their intent and not your impression of what they said. He also goes on to say that God has made each of us unique with our own cultures and nationalities, each with their strengths and weaknesses which we need to submit before the cross, look at objectively as much as possible, but celebrate that God has made a world in which we all can have different nationalities, different cultures that each have something good to offer. Praise God for those things. We as believers can have things in our culture that are good and worth preserving, but then also as believers we should be seeking to change things that are not worth preserving. For instance, if someone you know looks down on those of a different origin than them, that’s wrong and they need to be called out for it. But just as wrong is to assume sin and judge people for sins they have not committed.
- 2) The first two tenets of CRT that I listed “Racism is ordinary” and “White supremacy is everywhere and benefits white people” are assumptions rather than based on fact. They are assumed as part of the system and worldview of CRT and as a result cannot be refuted. This is like saying that someone is guilty unless proven innocent. Something that the Bible speaks very strongly against. For evidence of this look at Deuteronomy 19:15-21. It outlines there that two or three witnesses are required and present evidence for wrongdoing. If a witness testifies falsely then the Jews were to treat that person with the punishment he was trying to bring on the other party he was lying about. Another example can be found in Numbers 5:12-15.

Evidence is required before the law can come in and punish someone. CRT on the other hand assumes that all of Western culture, and specifically White American culture is by default racist and you must prove you are not racist. But as we discussed earlier this is next to impossible to do because of the assumptions held by proponents of CRT.

- 3) The concept of intersectionality may be able to help us to understand how people interact with one another to a small degree, but it also encourages us to look at each other based on which “group identities” we think we are a part of. By encouraging people to look at each other based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or other categories we are identifying ourselves based on which group identity we belong to. The Bible on the other hand fundamentally contradicts this by telling us that God looks at each of us based on our individual actions and decisions. As an example look at Ezekiel 18:20 “The person who sins is the one who will die. A son won’t suffer punishment for the father’s iniquity, and a father won’t suffer punishment for the son’s iniquity. The righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him.” (CSB) This is the case with what we see in the Old Testament law as well, they are laws for the individual members of Israel and for Israel as a whole. It is wrong to judge someone simply because of the group they belong to regardless if that advances the cultural narrative or not.

So we can see that there are several places where critical race theory conflicts with Biblical Christianity. It is good to study something in order to gain a perspective on what others around you believe, so that we can better share the gospel with those who believe such things. Many of the people who adopt these perspectives may have the best intent and motivations possible, but we need to help people recognize that ultimately these attitudes and beliefs are destructive both to societies and the people who adopt them. In love we should seek to bring people to the truth, that all men, regardless of their national origin or ancestry are made in the image of God and are therefore of equal value and dignity before him. We should be emphasizing that regardless of your ancestry, God has a place for you if you let Him into your life and let Him transform you.