

## Biblically Assessing Critical Theory, Intersectionality, and the Social Justice Movement

**Introduction:** Following up on our last Bible study, which was on biblical justice, this study will look at an increasingly influential approach to justice in our society, often dubbed “social justice” and “being woke,” that seems to be influencing many Christians to one degree or another, but is dangerous.

Neil Shevni: “Several years ago, I noticed a theological drift in some evangelical Christians, both in people I knew personally and in public figures. The drift often began with an interest in social justice, which I assumed meant applying biblical principles to our laws and institutions. And that’s a good thing. But then these same individuals began expressing other ideas that were harder and harder to reconcile with orthodoxy. Sometimes, they left the Christian faith altogether. I saw this process play out repeatedly and I couldn’t understand the connection. How do you go from saying “sexism is a sin” to saying “Christianity is just one of many paths to God”?”

“I was still trying to understand how people moved from point A to point B when I read the book *Race, Class, and Gender*, a 500-page anthology of writings touching on topics as diverse as Marxism, feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory. Everything suddenly made sense. People were not merely adopting a few new beliefs about politics; they were adopting a new worldview, which was gradually eroding their Christian worldview. That’s why I’m concerned. I see more and more Christians, especially young Christians, following a similar path today and I want to prevent that.” (“Social Justice, Critical Theory, and Christianity: Are They Compatible? – Part 1,”

<https://shenviapoletics.com/social-justice-critical-theory-and-christianity-are-they-compatible-part-1-2/>)

– Pulling a lot of the information for this study from Shevni's article and also his booklet with Pat Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement*

- In this study, we will look at this worldly approach to justice and assess it biblically.

### I. Terminology

- A. The terminology is fluid. So be careful to determine what is meant by it in context before drawing firm conclusions about what someone is saying. We are focusing on the terms in their current meanings that are especially influential in society at large.
  - E.g., social justice can be used to refer to the application of biblical principles of justice to society.
    - But this points up a concern: that some Christians could get drawn into the unbiblical version because of the same terminology.
- B. Critical theory – A diverse area of thought concerned with identifying, explaining, and eliminating oppression. Critical theorists may differ on numerous topics. But we will focus on certain claims of some critical theorists that are influential in current culture even though not all critical theorists necessarily hold them.
  - You might sometimes hear of “critical *race* theory,” which applies this approach to race.
- C. Intersectionality – The intersection/overlapping of oppressed identity/groups, whether in one person or between people.
  - An important specific expression of this is intersectionality as a form of identity politics in which the value of one's opinion depends on how many victim groups one belongs to. People are to be judged not on the basis of their actions, but on the basis of their group identity.
    - Identity politics – Political action conducted on the basis of group identity
- D. Social justice – The elimination of all forms of social oppression understood as a system or actions that result in or allow(s) for inequality (whether of opportunity or outcome)
- E. Woke – Believing that there is substantial systemic injustice in society, being alert to it (especially racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.), and believing in the pursuit of social justice

### II. Major Critical Theory/Social Justice Beliefs with Biblical Assessment

- A. Worldview (*What is a worldview?* → A basic set of beliefs by which we interpret and understand the world/reality)

1. Woke worldview: “We are members of social groups locked in a struggle for power. Our primary identity comes from our relationship to other groups. Suffering is caused by systems of oppression. Our purpose in life is to fight against the subjugation enacted by dominant groups, so that we can eventually achieve a state of equity.”

– How does this match up to a biblical worldview? → It is incompatible

2. Biblical worldview (ask for Scripture passages): *Who are we?* We are the creatures of a holy, good, and loving Creator God (Gen 1:1, 26-27; Rev 4:8; Ps 100:5). *What is our fundamental problem as human beings?* Sin / we have rebelled against God (Rom 3:23; 6:23). *What is the solution to our problem?* God sent Jesus to bear the penalty of our rebellion and rescue us (Rom 3:23-25a). *What is our primary moral duty?* To love God and others (Mark 12:28-31). *What is our purpose in life?* To glorify God (Rom 3:23; 1 Cor 10:31). [Perhaps skip some of these verses that will be look at later.]

B. Ascertaining truth is based on group identity.

1. Members of oppressor groups are blinded by their privilege and members of oppressed groups have special access to truth that should not be challenged.

a. Often there is a claim that the privileged person is trying to preserve his power.

b. The primary concern is unearthing and deconstructing the hidden motives of opponents, so that their claims can then be ignored.

2. If a woke person's claim is challenged by a member of an oppressed group, it can simply be claimed that the objector's objection is false because he has internalized oppression.

3. What's wrong with this if anything?

a. It assumes the woke person is always right and does not allow for him to be wrong.

b. It lacks humility.

c. It differs with the biblical view of truth.

1. What is the biblical view of truth? → It is objective (not relative) → That which accords with reality

2. What do these verses tell us about truth? – John 14:6, 17; 17:17

→ Rooted in God; defined by God and his word

– How does access to truth by someone's oppression level accord with defining it by God's word? → Incompatible

- The worldly social justice movement is incompatible with the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, i.e., that God's word is the supreme authority in matters of truth, faith, and practice. (See d. immediately below for explanation.)

d. It disregards reason, logic, argument, and objective evidence for helping us to discern truth. But that is what the very concept of biblical truth demands.

– Why? → Language and meaning rely on logic; the alternative is subjectivity/relativity, and then there is no objective truth and no way to say anything is right or wrong. But truth as merely subjective is incoherent, as such a claim is itself an objective claim.

C. Human identity is fundamentally rooted in division between dominant, oppressor groups and subordinate, oppressed groups along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors.

– How does this match up to biblical teaching? → Incompatible

1. What is our fundamental identity as human beings rooted in?

a. Gen 1:26-27 → God and creation in his image

– What ramifications does it have for people if they are made in God's image?

1. It means all people have vast inherent dignity and value (cf. Gen 9:5-6; James 3:9-10).

2. All people have share the common identity marker of having been made in God's image.

b. Anything else ideally? → In Christ

– What do we learn from these passages – 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:8-10; 4:24; Gal 2:20; 3:28?

- Our identity is most fundamentally in Christ. It is determined and derived from our union with Christ.

2. Anything else that all human beings have in common? → Rom 3:23-25a; 6:23; John 3:16-18, 36; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:11-12
  - All have sinned and need God's mercy/salvation in Jesus Christ. (You could break this down into 2 distinct markers true of all people → (1) All have sinned and stand condemned; (2) all need mercy/salvation in Jesus)
- These core identity markers unite all people across lines of race, class, and gender and form a basis for solidarity that undermines the foundation of critical theory and the worldly social justice movement.
- There are other markers that all people have in common according to the Bible; these are just a few obvious ones. Any others that spring to mind? (We won't really delve into them.)
3. The Bible forbids fundamental hostility/disunity among believers, but reveals that Christians are fundamentally united and to live out that unity in love and harmony and forgiveness.
  1. Gal 3:26-29
    - What does it mean about our relationship to one another if we are all sons of God? → We are family; we are brothers and sisters; we are one (as the passage explicitly says)
    - How can it say v. 28a? Are we really not male or female anymore, etc.? → No; it means that these differences do not affect our salvation or standing with God or our value or detract from our unity. It means that these categories are not our primary identity, but that our primary identity is our shared identity in Christ as children of God.
  2. Rev 4:9 – What does Rev 4:9 contribute to the issue? → We do have differences that continue to exist, and God recognizes them, but again, our fundamental identity comes from our common redemption by Jesus Christ
  3. Eph 2:14-22
    - a. Background: Jew/Gentile hostility and division
    - b. How does this passage relate to the issue? → Christ has made us one in him and granted us peace with him and one another. Fundamental identity and relationship based on oppression is false and unbiblical.
    - c. How did Jesus make us one and establish peace? → His death for us
      1. What did Christ's death accomplish? → Reconciles us to God *and* one another.
      2. Does this cohere with looking at people basically as divided up as oppressors vs. oppressed?
  4. Mark 10:42-45; John 13:34-35; Phil 2:2-4; Eph 4:32-5:2
    - What do these passages say about how we are to look at one another and treat one another?
      - As brothers and sisters in Christ, love one another, serve one another, and put one another first
        - How does that cohere with viewing one another as in conflict as oppressors vs/ oppressed
  5. Could look at so many passages! But that's good for now.
- D. A singular narrative, a singular set of values, and a singular set of norms is inherently oppressive.
  1. Critical theory believes it oppressive to even live according to a dominant group's ideas, values, and norms because it implicitly supports the dominant group's power over others.
    - a. This is referred to as hegemonic power by the woke thought leaders.
    - b. This partly explains why woke people think those who have not oppressed others in a traditional way (e.g., physical violence, cruelty, enslavement) are nonetheless oppressors by just thinking what they think and living according to their values.
  2. How does this line up with the Bible? → Incompatible
    - a. What is wrong with this? → The Bible provides a singular narrative, a singular set of values, and a singular set of norms that all should submit to, and Christianity seeks to lead everyone to submit to Christ and his way/the Bible.
      - “God has all the power in the universe, is completely sovereign over our lives, and answers to no one. . . . From the perspective of contemporary critical theory, God is the Ultimate Oppressor.”
    - b. Acts 17:24, 30; Matthew 28:18-20 (just examples; so many passages could be looked at)
      - How do these example passages address this issue (of hegemonic power)? → They show that all are to submit to Christianity's/the Bible's truth claims and values.

- E. Individuals from different demographic groups should be held to different moral standards purely on the basis of their group identity. (Moral Assymetry)
1. Members of what is seen as an oppressor group are morally tainted by their privilege even if their individual behavior has been blameless.
  2. What is immoral behavior for an individual from an oppressor group can be moral for an individual in an oppressed group.
    - E.g., Woke people tend to hold that a person from a racial minority cannot be racist, but a person from the racial majority can be racist. So a racist action done by a white person is not considered racist or wrong if done by a black person.
    - How does this match up to the Bible? → Incompatible
  3. Lev 19:15; Lev. 24:22 – What do these verses show? How do they address the issue?
    - People are to be held to the same standards and we should judge all matters impartially, favoring neither those with power nor those without. (But woke ideology holds that we should judge with partiality, favoring those without power over those with power.)
  4. 1 John 3:4; 5:17 – What do these verses show? How do they address the issue?
    - Sin is rooted in the violation of God’s will/commands (in thought, word, or deed), not power dynamics.
  5. Deut 24:16; Ezek 18:20, 30; Rom 2:6-11 – What do these verses show? How do they address the issue?
    - Each person is guilty only for sins he has personally committed, not for the sins of others or for one's group being dominant.
  6. Heb 4:15; 7:26 – How might these verses be relevant? → They show Jesus never sinned.
    - Why would that be relevant? → Jesus was a man who benefited from being male in a society dominated by patriarchy. Yet the sinless Son of God was guilty of nothing. His membership in an “oppressor” demographic group brought with it no moral breach and had zero implications relative to his moral state. The same is true for anyone who occupies “oppressor” demographic group categories today.

Conclusion: We could get a lot deeper into woke ideology, but this survey should be enough to show that it is incompatible with the Bible and Christian faith. Its worldview based on power dynamics is at odds with the Bible's worldview based on God. Its view of ascertaining truth being based on group identity is at odds with the Bible's view of truth as objective and rooted in God and his word. It's view of human identity as rooted in division between oppressor groups and oppressed groups is at odds with the Bible's view that human identity is rooted in our relationship to God, creation in God's image, and for Christians, also new creation in Christ and unity in Christ. It's view that a single, dominant worldview is inherently oppressive is at odds with Christianity's claim to be the truth and its mission to bring all into submission to Christ. And its partiality based on group identity is at odds with the biblical view of justice, impartiality, and individual responsibility. There may be kernels of truth in these various aspects of woke ideology, which we have not had time to discuss in this study, but it is fundamentally incompatible with God's word.