

Moody Bible Institute

Critical Race Theory: a Viable Tool for the Christian

Student Name

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1. Introduction

While many have heard of Critical Race Theory (CRT), it is also true that many have misunderstood CRT. Exposure to CRT does not imply CRT literacy. Within the church, many Christians have rejected CRT because of its rumors and undeserved stigma. Usually, said Christians have understood only the tip of the iceberg. CRT's influence in a variety of academic disciplines produces practical consequences in society. Given its influence, CRT merits the necessity for Christians to first understand and then critique the theory according to Scripture before endorsing or rejecting it. In this paper, I argue that CRT is a valid, endorsed tool for the Christian. After defining clearly the development of CRT, I will argue for Scripture's approval of its two main tenants: intersectionality and the idea that racism is ordinary. Then, I consider a few implications for CRT and conclude with a summary of all things considered.

2. What is CRT?

CRT can be defined as a fragmented body of knowledge or a movement intended to understand race, its history, and its current role in society, to inform how racial and social justice can ultimately be realized. It focuses on the relationship between race, racism, and power, particularly in law. According to CRT theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, CRT examines "the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the viewpoint of law's role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination" (Crenshaw et al. 11).

CRT, as it is generally known today, was first developed in the 1970s. A group of activists, lawyers, and legal scholars assembled to discuss stalled racial progress since the Civil Rights movement. Richard Delgado, one of CRT's earliest writers, affirms CRT's broad range of input from critical legal studies, to radical feminism, to a diversity of European philosophers, and the

American radical tradition (Delgado 2, 3). Many voices, some complementary and others contradictory, have contributed to the broad scope of CRT.

3. Main Tenants of CRT

Although CRT has never been nor will likely ever be one thing, there are yet several basic tenants that most theorists agree upon. These tenants anchor the movement, making it identifiable. The first tenant is the idea that racism is ordinary, not aberrational. CRT affirms the reality of racism in everyday life in order to address and cure it. It diagnoses racism in mortgage redlining, employment discrimination, hegemonic power, etc. On the contrary, the traditional “Color-Blind” conception of race enables and maintains more subtle forms of racism. The second tenant is called “interest convergence.” Derrick Bell, lawyer and CRT theorist, coined this tenant from the judicial activity before and after the *Brown V. Board of Education*: “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell 22). In other words, it is the idea that social progress will not be realized unless the interests of both the oppressed and oppressors share a common incentive. The third tenant is the idea that race is socially constructed. Delgado articulates this tenant sufficiently: “race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado 5). Although race is not natural, it is a social reality created and upheld by white supremacy. To exchange race with ethnicity-discourse “fails to account for the ways in which race has already been formalized in our institutions, particularly the law” (Cartagena 18). The fourth tenant is differential racialization and its consequences. It refers to the dominant society’s depictions of minority groups and how these stereotypes change according to their convenience. The fifth tenant is

intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw. It rejects essentialism, the idea that identity is fixed and static. Rather, intersectionality maintains that people have multiple identities. This tenant is often used to measure how oppressed or how privileged an individual or group may be. A white, heterosexual male is said to have more privilege and power than a black, homosexual female (Crenshaw 386). The sixth tenant is the Standpoint Theory. It is the idea that people of color have a unique authority to speak on issues of race and racism because of their experiences, particularly with the legal system. Whereas, white people may not have the competency to speak on such issues because they do not experience the tangible effects of racism.

4. Analysis and Critique of CRT According to Scripture

The tenant that racism is ordinary complies with Scripture. First, the charge of sin is a pillar of Christian theology and of the gospel itself (Genesis 3, Romans 3). Sin, including but not limited to racism, pervades the fabric of life on earth. It pervades human thought, desire, emotion, and will and produces practical, felt consequences. Its effect can be witnessed by man's failure to steward creation properly, such as profit-driven corporations that dump plastic in the ocean and thereby wreak environmental havoc. It can be witnessed by the number of domestic abuse cases reported each year. The list goes on. Is it unreasonable to believe that sinful people in positions of power have created unjust policies that harm creation and contribute to entropy?

The idea of unjust laws and a corrupt government is not foreign to the narrative of Scripture. Two examples are the stories of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and of Daniel. They refused to obey the king's laws because they contradicted God's higher law. The entire book of Judges is about the consistent corruption of Israel's leaders and the need for God's intervention. In the early church, Christians were willing to face martyrdom for not complying with the Roman law of sacrificing to emperor Decius. The same is true today in contemporary society: sinful people

and unjust laws still govern society and produce harmful consequences. Why would Christians assume that racism is an episode of the past? Why would they assume that the legal outcome of the Civil Rights movement, the *Brown V. Board of Education*, solved all the racial issues in the U.S.? Entropy is the inescapable decay of all things in the universe unless there is continual intervention. Because of this reality, God has provided rituals of remembrance for His people (memorials, communion, etc.). Remembrance is foundational to a consistent life of faith in a decaying world. In a similar manner, Christians should remember the social ills of the past and discern the social ills of the present age so that they may be agents of shalom instead of entropy. All things considered, the CRT tenant that racism is ordinary does not contradict Scripture; rather, it affirms the reality of sin in a decaying world in need of constant intervention.

Second, the tenant that racism is ordinary corresponds with Biblical narratives of racism (or better, ethnic discrimination) and God's judgment of it. Throughout Scripture, one can observe man's inclination towards homogeneity and the rejection of those deemed as "other." Jews, who were called to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 60:3), disobeyed God's commission by preferring their own and displaying a sense of superiority. One example is Jonah's resentment of the Ninevites and his refusal to preach to them. Ironically, Joppa, the city from where Jonah launched his journey to Tarshish to avoid preaching to another nation, was the very place God chose, 800 years later, to tell Peter to receive people from other nations (Acts 10:9-16).

Additionally, the Jews rejected Samaritans, half-blooded Jews who were the product of inter-ethnic marriages (Ezra 4, Nehemiah 4). When Jesus arrived on the scene, He flipped racist, social norms on its head by teaching the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and ministering to the Samaritan woman (John 4). Peter himself, a revered apostle, showed discrimination towards Gentiles and Paul rebuked him publicly for it (Galatians 2:11-14).

Throughout Scripture, the Jews were the recipients of racism (while under the dominion of the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Persians) and also the perpetrators of racism (as noted in the examples earlier). Racism is not foreign to the narratives of Scripture; hence, it is a normal but unfortunate reality in this sinful world. Throughout the Bible, God's heart for ethnic and social harmony imbues God's redemptive purposes and plan for mankind.

CRT's tenant of intersectionality also agrees with Scripture. In arguing that CRT is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity, Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer reject CRT's tenant of intersectionality, claiming that the tenant is anti-gospel. They rightly affirm that Scripture informs man's identity with three distinctions: made in the image of God, guilty of sin, and in need of a savior: "These three core identity markers unite all people across lines of race, class, and gender and form a basis for solidarity. We cannot look at any human being as wholly 'other' since they, like us, are image-bearers and sinners who need a Savior" (Shenvi 17). Although their view of man's identity is not incorrect, it oversimplifies the human experience and misunderstands the point of intersectionality. Crenshaw coined intersectionality to counteract how identity politics often "conflates or ignores [important] intragroup differences." For example, in the context of feminist movements, the omission of acknowledging differences is problematic because "the violence that women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw 357). This is clearly observed in the 1920s women's suffrage movement. Black women were excluded from NAWSA conventions, they often had to march separately from white women, and their contributions to suffragist history are frequently ignored (Bailey). Although the 19th Amendment granted American women the right to vote, most black women couldn't exercise that right until five decades later (Waxman). The

same could be said for the role of black women in movements fighting racial discrimination: black men set the agenda, often at the expense of the black woman's voice.

Shenvi and Sawyer reduce the purpose and importance of intersectionality by dismissing the real suffering and discrimination of ignored social groups such as black women. The purpose of intersectionality is to highlight these neglected human experiences. How would Shenvi and Sawyer respond to John 4? The woman at the well was a victim of overlapping discrimination. First, she was a woman and rabbis often did not speak to women publicly (v. 27). Second, she was a Samaritan (v. 9). Third, she was presumably a social outcast because of her shameful lifestyle (v. 17–18) and because she came to the well at a time when most people would not be present (v. 6). Jesus' acknowledgment of and compassion towards a woman who would otherwise be ignored and shunned makes this story as powerful as it is.

It is worth noting that while intersectionality is true, it may be applied in an unbiblical manner, such as the embrace of an LGBTQ identity. All identities, such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class, should be brought under the dominion of Christ's lordship; these identities, although important, are secondary to an identity in Christ. While Shenvi and Sawyer make good points in their critique, they commit a false dichotomy fallacy by assuming that the embrace of CRT is an abandonment of Christianity (and vice versa). The third option can be true: some CRT ideas may hold up against the authority of Scripture while other ideas and/or applications may not. To reject completely the ideas of CRT on the basis of a few unbiblical ideas and/or applications would be a fallacy of composition. As already stated earlier, CRT is far too large of a movement, with many voices and contributions, to reduce the entire whole to one of its parts. If Christians endorse parts of secular Greek philosophy or accept geometry although its origins are associated with Greek religion, why wouldn't Christians show the same treatment towards CRT?

5. Implications of CRT

The mission of justice is and ought to be the Christian's mission. A Christian proponent of CRT, Nathan Luis Cartagena rightly notes, "Because marginalization and oppression in pigmentocracies operate along racialized lines, Christians should share the common interests of critical race theorists" (Cartagena 8). Christians in the U.S. should take the liberty to first understand the movement and then parse through the content to determine what withstands the test of Scripture and what does not. In the U.S., the pursuit of racial justice should be a priority of the church.

At Moody Bible Institute (MBI), students and faculty can use CRT to affirm the reality of racism. If racism is ordinary, it likely occurs on campus every day: in people's thoughts, in decisions about whom people befriend, in faculty recruitment, bias in theology, etc. Intersectionality implies that some students and faculty have more or less privilege based on their membership to certain social groups.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that CRT is a viable tool for Christians in understanding and engaging racism. Scripture approves CRT's two main tenants: intersectionality and the idea that racism is ordinary. Intersectionality is reflected in the woman described in John 4; since she was a victim of overlapping discrimination, Jesus' response towards her was all the more compelling. The tenant that racism is ordinary is affirmed by the theology of sin and Biblical narratives of racism throughout Scripture. The implications of CRT suggest that U.S. Christians should engage racism since oppression operates along racialized lines and justice is part of God's redemptive plan. Contextually, MBI members should use CRT to address potential social ills on-campus.

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