If critical race theory were only a theoretical or philosophical or intellectual issue, I would start with definitions. In fact, I would start with a biblical argument for why definitions and clarity and transparency are essential — for Christian faithfulness to Scripture and to God — especially when spiritual forces of darkness and confusion and deception are in the air. Which they are.

Paul calls Satan “the prince of the power of the air” ([Ephesians 2:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%202.2)), and Satan’s specialty is *deception* through twisted truths and half-truths. And deception flourishes in the fog of confusion, and confusion is deepened and advanced through the lack of clarity, and clarity is possible only where we know the meaning of the terms each other is using. So, I hope you can see how seriously I take definitions and clarity and transparency in communication ([2 Corinthians 2:17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Cor%202.17); [4:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Corinthians%204.2)).

And I do intend to get to as much definitional clarity as I’m capable of. But not in this first episode of *Ask Pastor John* on critical race theory. I’m not going to start with definitions. And I hope you’ll see why before we’re done. Critical race theory is not only a bundle of beliefs and ideas and ways of thinking (about race and about other important things); it has also become a relationally destructive means of defamation. And that is what I want to talk about first — the way Christians treat each other and talk about each other when it comes to this issue: race, or more specifically, critical race theory.

“It is a very serious thing to tell the world that somebody has a deadly intellectual and moral disease.”

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So, I know this first session will be frustrating to some of our listeners. Because my guess is that thousands of you do not have any clear idea of what critical race theory is. And here I am talking about it as a pejorative label that some people put on other people to their detriment. And I haven’t even said what it *is*! How frustrating is that! But try to trust me on this — not for a long time, just a little while. I *will* deal with definitions in our second episode, to the best of my ability. But there are reasons for tackling the relational issue among Christians first. I hope you will see this.

There are biblical-relational principles at stake here that do not depend on the definition of *critical race theory*, because they apply to all kinds of explosive issues. That’s what I want to get at — those biblical-relational principles. And I think this needs to be said first.

**Conversation on Critical Race Theory**

I’ll illustrate what I’m talking about with a podcast conversation about critical race theory between Rasool Berry, teaching pastor at The Bridge Church in Brooklyn, and Neil Shenvi, whose apologetics website describes him as a homeschooling theoretical chemist — believe me, that is an understatement when it comes to his qualifications.

They both have written and spoken about critical race theory. Both are articulate. Both are winsome. I found myself really liking and appreciating these two Christian brothers. Even when they were emphasizing very different perspectives on critical race theory.

And I put it that way intentionally — “emphasizing very different perspectives.” I don’t say, “even when they were *disagreeing* . . .” Because I couldn’t put my finger on any specific disagreement about the rightness or the wrongness of critical race theory in its specific assertions. What mainly emerged in this conversation, and was so helpful, was a clarification of the relational dynamics at work in these kinds of conversations.

They were hosted by Justin Brierley on the *Unbelievable?* show. You can watch it [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbzPDoEgO_s).

I think Pastor Berry was speaking for lots of African Americans — not all (nobody speaks for all African Americans) — when he said that his primary concern or critique of the “whole conversation” was that he and many others woke up one morning and found they had been tarred and feathered with the label *critical race theory*. He had to go look it up. Just like most of us did.

He said he was born and raised in inner-city Philadelphia and went to the University of Pennsylvania, majored in Africana Studies and Sociology, became a Christian as a freshman, and was formed by evangelicalism. During his studies, he never heard about critical race theory.

To quote him: “The brothers and I had not even heard of critical race theory until we were told that, when we said something needs to change when George Floyd is kneeled on, we were being held captive by critical race theory. ‘What are you talking about? I’m just trying to respond to the injustices all around me.’”

Then he explains: “I’m being given a label that I don’t really want to be talking about. I want to be talking about the death that is in the street, and the disparities like COVID having a disproportionate impact on people of color. We see these disparities across education, health care, economics. I would rather talk about that, but any time you talk about that in Christian circles, you are given this title.

“It is possible for two people to ask the same question and come to radically different answers.”

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“More energy is being devoted to the tethering of critical race theory to what we are saying than is being devoted to the problem of racism itself.”

Or more broadly, he expresses his concern this way: “The church is being brought *ethical* concerns and is responding with *epistemological* critique. Like a man who tells you he is bleeding, and you ask, ‘How did you come to that conclusion?’”

**Two Biblical-Relational Principles**

Now, I said that my aim here is to get at biblical-relational issues that are relevant quite apart from the definition of *critical race theory*. So, in view of what we’ve just heard from Rasool Berry, let me state two of those biblical-relational principles.

1. Christians should be careful not to slander a Christian brother by the careless use of pejorative labels — like *critical race theory*.
2. When a Christian brother is honestly analyzing and exposing false beliefs or unbiblical ways of thinking (like critical race theory), we should not silence or denounce the brother by pointing to blood in the streets.

Now, let me say a word about each of those principles, because my guess is that the first one may offend some critics of critical race theory, and the second one may offend some justice warriors, both of whom may be doing exactly what they should be doing, and neither of whom I want to offend.

**1. Beware of Slandering**

So, first, a word about slander.

Jesus said, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, . . . *false witness, slander*. These are what defile a person” ([Matthew 15:18–20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2015.18%E2%80%9320)).

Paul said that our new identity in Christ involves putting way “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor *and slander*. . . . Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” ([Ephesians 4:31–32](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%204.31%E2%80%9332)).

And Peter said that when we are born again, we should “put away all malice . . . and *all slander*” ([1 Peter 2:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%202.1)).

Slander is speaking untrue, pejorative things about someone, usually in public. And Jesus and Paul and Peter say, “That’s not what Christians do.”

Now, my guess is that when Pastor Berry says that he and others were pinned with the critical-race-theory label before they even knew what it was, some critics of critical race theory will point out that you can be infected with the disease without knowing the name of the disease.

Which of course we all know to be true. But what I am underscoring is that it is a very serious thing to tell the world (which is what social media does) that somebody has a deadly intellectual and moral disease, which you may even think is worthy of excommunication, when, in fact, all you see are a few symptoms of the disease, which may be owing not to the disease at all, but to some other cause.

“Let’s give each other some room to be different in the way we attack the same evil.”

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What if one of the symptoms of the disease is excessive perspiration, but this perspiration is owing to long hours of hard work on some worthy cause? And what if one of the symptoms is loss of appetite, but this loss of appetite is owing to deep sorrow rather than to the disease?

Christians should be *so* careful not to slander a brother with pejorative labels *that* we go the extra mile to make sure we know whether his actions and statements are really owing to his infection with the lethal aspects of critical race theory, or not.

In fact, I think one of the best ways to avoid slander in these highly contentious days is this: if you hear or read a brother say something that you think is unchristian or unbiblical with regard to race, don’t call it critical race theory. Call it unchristian and unbiblical (preferably in a private email, not in a public tweet or blog or podcast), and give solid biblical evidence for your concern.

Here’s one more point on this first biblical-relational principle of avoiding slander. One way to avoid slander is not assuming that we know a person’s ethical or intellectual or doctrinal stance on the basis of the *questions* he asks, rather than the *answers* he gives. If I pose the question of why there are racial disparities in health care, education, etc., and you assume that because of my *question* I am infected with the disease of critical race theory, you are on the brink of slander. It is possible for two people to ask the same question and come to radically different answers. So, labeling someone on the basis of their questions is careless at best, and possibly slander.

So, my first biblical-relational principle is this: Christians should be careful not to slander a Christian brother by the careless use of pejorative labels — like *critical race theory*.

**2. Beware of Silencing**

Second, when a Christian brother is honestly analyzing and exposing false beliefs or unbiblical ways of thinking (say, in critical race theory), we should not silence or denounce the brother by pointing to blood in the streets.

Now, I am not saying that Rasool Berry did this on the program I was watching. He didn’t. But I want to address this because *that is* the way he will be criticized when he says, for example, “The church is being brought *ethical* concerns and is responding with *epistemological* critique. Like a man who tells you he is bleeding, and you ask, ‘How did you come to that conclusion?’”

People are going to criticize that kind of statement: first, because it’s an overstatement (the kind we all use!) — as if the *whole* church is doing nothing but epistemology in response to the ethical issues of our time. And second, because people will hear it as shutting down all intellectual wrestling with false *ideas* that are upstream from the deadly effects they may have in the streets.

Instead of silencing or denouncing someone who is wrestling with the intellectual or theoretical or epistemological roots of false beliefs and unbiblical thinking, let’s give each other some room to be different in the way we attack the same evil.

For example, COVID-19 is a killer. One person is fighting it in the research laboratory eighteen hours a day. Another person is fighting it as a doctor or nurse on the ground, with his hands in the blood. Another person is a politician doing his best to discern what policies might best hinder the spread of the disease. Another person is giving people guidance and hope with the biblical interpretation of God’s providence, and comforting those who have lost loved ones.

How mistaken it would be for the doctor, who is risking his life in intensive care, to say to the researcher, who has never touched a diseased person, “Stop wasting your time in the laboratory! Get in here where the suffering is, and get your hands dirty.”

And the same is true for racism. Most Christians realize that belittling or disrespecting or hating or rejecting or hindering the success of someone simply because of his race is evil. One Christian might fight that evil in the street. Another in the courts. Another as a mother raising loving and respectful children. Another as an academic historian unfolding the way race was constructed as an instrument of oppression. Another preaching the whole counsel of God. And another critiquing critical race theory precisely because he believes it is not a biblical path to justice and love, but is destructive.

So, my second biblical-relational principle, then, is that we not silence or denounce one strategy of love by exalting another. That we not say, “There’s blood in the streets; therefore, intellectual critiques of critical race theory are not a priority.” Nor that we say, “Demolishing critical race theory is such a priority that putting a tourniquet on a bleeding man in the street is irrelevant to the great struggles of our time.” Brothers, we don’t have to do this to each other.

“Christians should be careful not to slander a Christian brother by the careless use of pejorative labels.”

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There are tens of thousands of pastors right now who are *not* trying to tether critical race theory to every black lover of justice. And there are critics of critical race theory who believe with all their heart, and rightly, that there are aspects of critical race theory that are destructive to love and justice and racial harmony, so that their investment in the criticizing of critical race theory is not a detour away from the problem of racism, but an effort to destroy it.

**From My Heart to Yours**

So, in the next episode on critical race theory, we will try to say *what it is*, and why it’s so controversial. But for now, two pleas from my heart to yours, in reverse order:

2. When a Christian brother is honestly analyzing and exposing false beliefs or unbiblical ways of thinking, we should not silence or denounce the brother by pointing to blood in the streets.

1. Christians should be careful not to slander a Christian brother by the careless use of pejorative labels — like *critical race theory*.