Editor’s Note: Listen to [“Critical Race Theory, Part 1”](https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/critical-race-theory-part-1)

This is our second episode about critical race theory. I focused last time on two biblical-relational principles that I wanted to plead for. And I postponed a definition of what critical race theory is and the question of why it is so controversial and why it matters. So, that’s what we’re about now.

In my understanding, critical race theory is worth talking about not only because it is causing divisions among Christians at points where I don’t think divisions need to exist, but also because, in its mainstream expression — not every use made of it, but in its mainstream expression — it is another manifestation of the age-old enslavement of the fallen human heart to self-deification (“I will be my own god”), and self-definition (“I will define my own essential identity”), and self-determination (“I will decide my own truth and my own morality, without deference to any authority outside myself”).

I’m not saying that everybody who has gotten some help by delving into critical race theory is guilty of these things. Not by a long shot. I’m saying these are the root problems of the mainstream, scholarly, decades-long development of critical race theory, which is why it is being so hotly contested. And in that sense, rightly contested.

So, my most fundamental aim here is to encourage us all in the convictions that (1) we are not God, but Yahweh alone is God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has spoken truthfully in Scripture; (2) we do not define our own essential identity, but God does — by his word, by his creation, by his blood-bought transformation of his people; and (3) we do not have ultimate self-determination: God decides what is true, not we; God decides what is right, not we; and, if we are saved from sin and for God, it will be God who saves us, not we ourselves.

“This is not a neutral theory. It is laden with assumptions about reality that put it at odds with biblical thinking.”

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Even more specifically, I want to establish us in these convictions, over against the core philosophical convictions of critical race theory, because I believe with all my heart that these convictions, not those of critical race theory, will serve the cause of racial harmony, racial justice, and the flourishing of a joyful, respectful, Christ-exalting racial and ethnic diversity in the body of Christ. In other words, critical race theory is not a problem because it raises the challenge of racial justice, and racial harmony, and racial respect, and racial glory, but because it *fails* us as we try to take up these challenges in a hopeful, Christ-exalting way.

**What Is Critical Race Theory?**

Now, what is it? And how does it manifest this self-deification, self-definition, and self-determination?

As with most philosophical schools of thought — and that is what we really are dealing with — you can define critical race theory *generically* with regard to its aims, or you can define it more *essentially* with regard to its core assumptions and conclusions.

**Generic Definition**

If we stay at the generic level for a moment, critical race theory will not sound controversial because it will overlap with the legitimate goals and concerns of many Christians. For example, the [Purdue University website](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/critical_race_theory.html) defines critical race theory in this generic way (in terms of its goals):

CRT [critical race theory] scholars attempt to understand [1] how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural conceptions of race and [2] how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice.

Now, if we don’t read more into some of those words than we should, there are many Christians who would say, rightly, “Those are some of *my* big concerns!” So, we might talk right past each other, if we don’t stop to get clarity about the meaning of critical race theory that we have in mind when we speak of it either sympathetically or critically. In this, and many other issues, we need to take care to get our definitions clear up front in our conversations.

**Assumptions and Conclusions**

Now, if we go beneath these *generic* goals of critical race theory to the assumptions and conclusions of its mainstream exponents, things become seriously problematic for Christians with biblical convictions, because this is not a neutral theory. It is laden with assumptions or viewpoints about reality that put it at odds with biblical thinking. So, let’s try to get at this more essential definition.

It helps us define critical race theory if we understand that it is an offshoot of critical theory.

“They believe a person’s essential identity is self-chosen, self-constructed, not God-designed or God-given.”

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What critical theory tries to do is understand society by viewing it primarily as interconnected groups which are related to each other as powerful or oppressed, advantaged or disadvantaged, privileged or discriminated against. It studies these groups in order to find and challenge power structures, which shape the relationships between groups.

That’s where the words *critical* and *theory* get their meaning. It’s a *theory* in the sense that it’s a way of explaining how society works. And it’s *critical* in the sense that it assesses and challenges (is *critical* of) the way groups exert power or are oppressed by that power.

Even though critical theory may have started with a concern about the relationships of privilege and oppression between classes, like rich and poor, white-collar and blue-collar, educated and less educated, professional and tradesmen, blue bloods and commoners, etc., the theory now has given rise to an array of focuses (theories, disciplines, studies) from queer theory to fat studies.

The reason for this spawning of so many oppositional studies is that, as soon as you focus on groups and power dynamics, you see them everywhere: women–men, heterosexual–homosexual, fixed gender–transgender, old–young, Western–non-Western, American–Canadian, able-bodied–disabled, short–tall, slender–obese. On every one of these pairs, you can find books and studies more or less shaped by critical theory — a focus on the identity of the group and a challenge of the power or the privilege of one group over the other.

So, critical *race* theory (add *race* to *critical theory*) tries to understand and challenge (deal *critically* with) the power and oppression relationships that have marked racial groups historically, and still do to this day.

Now, it’s true that the focus on *groups*, while minimizing the individual, and the focus on *power*, while minimizing other relational dynamics (like love and humility and graciousness), can skew our understanding and yield unhelpful strategies. Nevertheless, those very focuses, misleading as they might be in some ways, can also reveal insights that may be strategically helpful in moving toward greater justice.

**What’s the Root Problem?**

So, what’s the root problem? To dig down to what I think is the root problem of critical race theory in its mainstream expression, I had to probe behind a few controversial statements that were at first baffling to me, and then became revealing. Let me quote two of these statements and then describe my probing to the root issue. These are quotes from mainstream critical race theory.

1. “We cannot be anti-racist if we are homophobic or transphobic.”

Here’s the second one, this time from a Christian conference moving in step with mainstream critical race theory:

2. “[Biblical] inerrancy and infallibility are orthodoxies of white-supremacist thought.”

My guess is that most of you hear both of these quotations and are bamboozled by them. “What! How do they get there?” That has been the most illuminating question for me: How do they get there? Let’s take them one at a time.

**Anti-Racism and Sexual Ethics**

“We cannot be anti-racist if we are homophobic or transphobic.”

“Inside critical race theory, God is small and negligible. The Bible is small and negligible. Truth is small and negligible.”

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Let’s make sure that we are clear about what mainstream critical race theorists mean by *homophobic* and *transphobic*. They don’t just mean the fear and hatred of people who try to change their sex or who have sexual desires for people of the same sex. They mean to include in the words *homophobic* and *transphobic* the historic Christian view that homosexual behavior is sinful, and trying to change your God-given sex is sinful. What they are saying, then, is that you can’t hold these historic Christian convictions and be anti-racist.

So, the question is, Why not? Or, How did they arrive at that conclusion?

Here is my answer, and my deepest problem with critical race theory. They arrive at this conclusion because at root they believe a person’s essential identity is self-chosen, self-constructed, not God-designed or God-given. Or another way to say it would be that, when it comes to our own identity, we are our own god. We do not acknowledge or submit to any divine truth or morality as above us, constraining or limiting our own self-definition, self-construction.

So, if I choose to be a woman though God made me a man, I am right to do so. No God, no morality, no religion, no ideology can replace me as the self-determining, self-defining, self-deifying sovereign of my own identity.

Now, you may be asking, “How does that observation explain the statement, ‘We cannot be anti-racist if we are homophobic or transphobic’?”

I think the answer from critical race theory would be something like this: “When you say that a person is wrong to claim to be a woman if he was born a man, and when you say that it’s wrong for people to act on their homosexual desires, you are wielding ideological power to oppress two groups of people who have freely and rightly chosen their identity. Call it what you will, you are exerting your supremacy to marginalize a vulnerable group.

“And the reason people like you who do that can’t be anti-racist is because the same position of ideological supremacy from which you denounce and marginalize a transgender person or a sexually active homosexual person is in essence the same position of power and privilege and supremacy from which you will justify your superiority and dominance over other races.”

When God is out of the picture, what’s left to determine right and wrong, and what our true identity is, is personal autonomy (*self*-definition, *self*-determination). And if you reject such personal autonomy as the final arbiter of right and wrong, then within the framework of God-evicting critical race theory, the only explanation left for your behavior is your own *will to power*. Therefore, if you reveal your *rejection* of human autonomy — self-determination, self-definition — in regard to homosexual behavior or attempts at sex change, you show yourself guilty of governing all your relationships by a will to power rather than a respect for autonomy. For those are the only two options in a “theory” where God and his word are not supreme.

**Biblical Inerrancy and White Supremacy**

Which leads directly to the roots of the second baffling statement, namely: “[Biblical] inerrancy and infallibility are orthodoxies of white-supremacist thought.” Why would a person say that? What’s the root issue?

The root issue is that the claim to have an infallible Bible undermines the fundamental assumption of critical race theory in its mainstream expression. That fundamental assumption is that human identity is self-constructed, not God-given. Any group, therefore, that claims to have access to an infallible word of God that dictates human identity and human right and wrong is a manifest threat to human autonomy. Within the framework of critical race theory, the claim of biblical authority can be understood only as a group trying to seize power — in this case, white power, since most of the confessions of faith in the history of the church that espouse biblical infallibility have been written by white men.

**Our Hope for Ethnic Harmony**

So, in conclusion and summary: critical race theory, in its generic definition as a quest for understanding the history of oppression in race relations, and the present attitudes and structures that continue that oppression, is a worthy quest.

“If we would be more saturated by God’s word, and more broken and humbled and submitted to it, there would be hope.”

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And critical race theory in its more essential definition, including its mainstream assumptions and conclusions, is a manifestation of the age-old enslavement of the fallen human heart to self-deification (“I will be my own god”), and self-definition (“I will define my own essential identity”), and self-determination (“I will decide my own truth and my own morality, without deference to any authority outside myself”). And therefore, to try to make progress in racial justice and racial respect and racial harmony by absorbing the assumptions and categories and conclusions and strategies of critical race theory is a dead-end street.

Or as I said earlier, critical race theory is not a problem because it raises the challenge of racial justice and racial harmony and racial respect and racial glory. It’s a problem because *it fails us* as we try to take up these challenges in a hopeful, Christ-exalting way.

Inside critical race theory, God is small and negligible. The Bible is small and negligible. Truth is small and negligible. And evil is big, and there is no answer for it. It is a hopeless path.

But inside that infallible word called the Bible, there is an absolutely explosive redemption, and blood-bought reconciliation, and Christ-exalting harmony. And the failures of the church, historically and today, cannot cancel it. It is there. And if we would be more saturated by God’s word, and more broken and humbled and submitted to it, there would be hope. That’s my prayer.