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## **Critical Race Theory: A Definitional Perspective and a Christian Model of Understanding Systemic Racism**

By

Dr. Steven W. Brooks

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!  
(Psalms 133:1, NIV)

Though *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), in some form, has been around since the 1970s, we have seen a recent emphasis of CRT, especially in national news and social media. In a graduate-level course I teach in multicultural counseling, some students are inclined to believe our textbook (Sue, et al., 2019) is a proponent of CRT, though the term or phrase is not mentioned in the book. The students' assumptions seem to derive from their interpretation of CRT. It is important, then, to investigate various perspectives, how they are interpreted, and how they are perpetuated.

My investigation began with study of foundational materials like *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, by Delgado and Stefancic (2017). The authors provided historical context, explanation of major themes, critiques, and ample illustrations. I then consulted the literature, both scholarly and popular. Note that in the category of "popular," I include mainline media outlets, including major news organizations. This is because so-called major news outlets have almost universally become known for commentary and political biases.

As it pertains to CRT, many concepts and terms seem to have evolving meanings. These meanings are often influenced by the perspective of culture, race, politics, history, and current events. As an exercise, access the websites for, in alphabetical order, ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, and NBC. Use their search engines to research "Critical Race Theory." You will likely encounter scores of articles ranging in intent from didactic to persuasive. As one might imagine, many of the headlines tend to betray the organization's political and social inclinations.

As another exercise, access an internet search engine, and type in "What is Critical Race Theory." Again, you will encounter a myriad of websites, but focus seems to be on the news sites. In the first 4 pages of search returns, I found articles from the New York Times, CNN, Fox News, US News, Reuters, Bloomberg, PBS, New York Post, Huffington Post, Newsweek, and the Wall Street Journal, just to name a few. Add to that many other news organizations, schools, universities, and various websites, there is no shortage of discussion on the subject!

As an aside, to the Christian community, it should be no surprise that CRT has been so variously interpreted and even perhaps misunderstood. Consider all the

doctrines and points of theology on which Christians cannot agree. Ask a cross-section of Christians to define or describe holiness, sanctification, communion, sacrament, baptism, worship, etc. Or ask them how old the earth is. You get the idea. If we cannot agree on doctrinal or theological issues, perhaps it is reasonable to conclude that we will not agree on CRT (and a host of other subjects).

### **So, what is Critical Race Theory?**

The textbook definition, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2017):

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious (p. 3).

Critical race theory sprang up in the 1970s as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back (p. 4).

Of several principal figures in CRT's origins include Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both attorneys and educators. Bell is considered the father of Critical Race Theory (Lynn and Dixon, 2013). Though CRT had its origins in law, the movement has spread to politics, sociology, business, and education as a discipline. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) assert these basic tenets of CRT (pp. 8-9):

1. First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational— “normal science,” the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country.
2. Second, most would agree that our system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group.
3. A third theme of critical race theory, the “social construction” thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations.

A note about social constructs. The last point seems to align with the Hays and Erford (2018) definition of race as “an arbitrary, socially constructed classification of individuals and is often based on physical distinctions such as skin color, hair texture, facial form, and shape of the eye (p. 8). I hope this definition gives us pause.

I was born in 1961 and experienced my childhood in a somewhat tumultuous decade. But even though it has been reported that by the age of 4, children “associate particular racial groups (e.g., Whites) with high status-makers” (Sullivan, et al., 2020, pl. 395), I was virtually oblivious to associated social issues. I knew that the Vietnam War and civil rights seemed to dominate the news. Our reception of the news was largely restricted to three TV networks and a local newspaper. Still, I distinctly remember some

aspects of social justice, though I could not define them at the time. Specifically, I recall—in my social circles—the evolution of various uses of the terms colored, negro, black, Afro-American, and African American. Even as an adolescent, I saw how even terminology was socially constructed. This phenomenon is part of racialization (Gans, 2017), or the process involved in developing and understanding racial perceptions. Racialization as a process creates hierarchies that are somewhat defined by perceptions of “inferiority and superiority based on perceived biological and/or cultural differences” (Weiner, 2012, p. 334).

Anderson and Zuercher (2001) have a frank discussion on this in their chapter called, “Why do I have to call you ‘African American’” (p. 74ff). In this fascinating exchange, these two friends, one black (Anderson) and one white (Zuercher), had the opportunity to leverage their bond to have many frank discussions. Anderson suggested that many of society’s monikers (e.g., colored) were imposed by society, but black Americans of African descent eventually embraced descriptors like “African American.” Anderson is quick to point out that not every “black” person is of African descent, hence the need for ongoing cultural sensitivity.

The notion of *social construct* is important in explaining CRT, as a social construct is opposed to, say, a biological reality. A socially constructed notion might be defined in a continuum between idealists and realists (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 21ff). The idealists might see racism as a thought, notion, or attitude. Racism would be a mental categorization, an impression. The idealist might assert that every American, for instance, has the same opportunities; that the playing field is level, and everyone, regardless of race, has the same potential. In support of this notion, Zamudio, et al. (2011) assert that,

CRT educators have relied on CRT concepts to critique the notion of a meritocratic society as it pertains to schooling. Meritocracy assumes a level playing field where all individuals in society have an equal opportunity to succeed. Meritocracy also assumes that one’s work ethic, values, drive, and individual attributes such as aptitude and intelligence, determine success or failure. In a society where education is considered the great equalizer, the myth of meritocracy has more than just ideological connotations. If natural ability and hard work (i.e., merit) are the keys for success, then those who fail to achieve, it is believed, have only themselves, their families, or at best, a random fateful turn of luck to blame. Thus, despite the existing inequalities in society, it is believed that universal education in a free society provides every child with the equal opportunity to achieve his or her potential (pp. 11-12).

To the realist, “racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 21). It is systemic, real, tangible, and demonstrable.

### **Popular Definitions: News Outlets.**

Because so many people get their information from various news media, I will summarize some definitions and perspectives below from various news outlets, in alphabetical order, **emphasis mine**. The reader should be mindful that these news outlets are also often characterized by political and social bents. That is, they can *report* the news and *comment* on the news.

#### ABC News

Critical race theory is a study in academia based on the concepts of **systemic and institutional racism**. Systemic racism refers to how the government has discriminated against Black, Indigenous and other people of color through unjust policies concerning housing, employment, criminal justice, education and more.

From the conception of slavery in America, to the Jim Crow laws that segregated Black people, to the disproportionate criminalization and brutality against Black Americans, Crenshaw said racism and white supremacy have persevered in the U.S. through law. Even if some discriminatory laws or policies are no longer in effect, she said, they can still impact families for generations (Alfonseca, 2021).

#### Bloomberg

Critical race theory, or CRT, proposes that **any analysis of American society must take into account its history of racism and how race has shaped attitudes and institutions**. It often overlaps with discussions of systemic racism — the ways policies, procedures and institutions work to perpetuate racial inequity even in the absence of personal racial animus. The theory can be used to understand, for example, the fact that the typical White U.S. household has seven times the amount of wealth of the average Black one. That gap can be traced back to, among other things, the U.S. government's practice starting in the 1930s of marking Black neighborhoods in red ink on maps, ostensibly as a warning of credit risk to lenders. Four decades of mortgage discrimination are still felt today, as home ownership has been the biggest source of wealth accumulation for the middle class (Suddath, 2021).

#### CNN

Critical race theory recognizes that **systemic racism** is part of American society and challenges the beliefs that allow it to flourish.

“Critical race theory is a **practice**. It’s an approach to grappling with a history of White supremacy that rejects the belief that what’s in the past is in the past, and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it,” said Kimberlé Crenshaw, a founding critical race theorist and a law professor who teaches at UCLA and Columbia University.

Critical race theorists believe that racism is an everyday experience for most people of color, and that a large part of society has no interest in doing away with it because it benefits White elites.

Many also believe that American institutions are racist and that people are privileged or oppressed because of their race (Karimi, 2021).

### Fox News

What exactly is critical race theory? The answer to that question appears to have eluded many, as controversies over racial diversity trainings and curricula have swept the nation's schools in recent months.

Often compared by critics to actual racism, CRT is a school of thought that generally focuses on **how power structures and institutions impact racial minorities**. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the first annual CRT workshop took place in 1989 but its origins go back as far as the mid-20th century with the development of a more general precursor known as critical theory.

Advocates of these ideas view the world through the lens of power relationships and societal structures rather than individuals. The movement itself came in reaction to the perceived failures of classical liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Race, according to this view, is a relatively recent social construct that is weaponized by dominant groups to oppress others (Dorman, 2021).

### NBC News

Critical race theory is a study in academia based on the concepts of **systemic and institutional racism**. Systemic racism refers to how the government has discriminated against Black, Indigenous and other people of color through unjust policies concerning housing, employment, criminal justice, education and more.

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### New York Times

Critical race theory is a concept, once the domain of graduate schools, that some observers say is now influencing American K-12 curriculums. The theory argues **that historical patterns of racism are ingrained in law and other modern**

**institutions, and that the legacies of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow still create an uneven playing field for Black people and other people of color.**

The idea is that racism is not a matter of individual bigotry but is systemic in America. Recently critics have made C.R.T. a catchall target for opposition to equity efforts, affirmative action and “wokeness” in general (Jackson, 2021).

#### Newsweek

Kendall Thomas, a law professor at Columbia University and co-editor of *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, told Newsweek: "CRT maps the nature and workings of **'institutional racism.'**"

"CRT challenges us to see that racial injustice in America is not, and has never been, just a problem of isolated instances of individual bias and private prejudice which we can solve by enacting 'color-blind' laws and policies.

"CRT tracks the ways in which the 'color-blind racism' of today's post-civil rights era entrenches racial disparities, discrimination and disadvantage among Black, Brown and Native American communities without ever explicitly using the language of 'race'" (Kim, 2021).

#### PBS

Critical race theory is a way of thinking about America’s history through the lens of racism. Scholars developed it during the 1970s and 1980s in response to what they viewed as a lack of racial progress following the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

It centers on the idea that **racism is systemic in the nation’s institutions and that they function to maintain the dominance of white people in society.**

**The architects of the theory argue that the United States was founded on the theft of land and labor and that federal law has preserved the unequal treatment of people on the basis of race.** Proponents also believe race is culturally invented, not biological.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, executive director of the African American Policy Forum, a social justice think tank based in New York City, was one of the early proponents. Initially, she says, it was “simply about telling a more complete story of who we are” (Anderson, 2021).

#### Reuters

Critical race theory (CRT) is an approach to studying U.S. policies and institutions that is most often taught in law schools. Its foundations date back to the 1970s, when law professors including Harvard Law School's Derrick Bell began exploring how race and racism have shaped American law and society.

The theory rests on the premise that **racial bias - intentional or not - is baked into U.S. laws and institutions**. Black Americans, for example, are incarcerated at much higher rates than any other racial group, and the theory invites scrutiny of the criminal justice system's role in that (Borter, 2021).

## U.S. News

Critical race theory traces its origins to a framework of legal scholarship that gained momentum in the 1980s by challenging conventional thinking about race-based discrimination, which for decades assumed that discrimination on the basis of race could be solved by expanding constitutional rights and then allowing individuals who were discriminated against to seek legal remedies. However, some legal scholars pointed out that such solutions – though well-intentioned – weren't effective because, they argued, racism is pervasive and **baked into the foundation of the U.S. legal system** and society as a whole (Camera, 2021).

Reviewing the above definitions, one can see a common CRT theme: systemic racism; that is, racism is very much a part of the system, our social system, the American system. In sum, CRT refers to

- Systemic racism (ABC, CNN, NBC, PBS).
- Institutional racism (ABC, Bloomberg, Fox News, NBC, Newsweek).
- An explanation of how racism is ingrained in law (NYT, Reuters, U.S. News).

## More Definitions: A review of the literature

The news organizations were actually quite accurate, as supported by a review of the scholarly literature. Trevino, et al. (2008) called CRT a “critical-emancipationist analytic program” (p. 7) born from a response to what W.E.B. Du Bois called, “the problem of the color line” (racism). CRT moved the thesis of social justice from casual literature into politics, the law, sociology, and education. Moreover, CRT

remains faithful to its original mandate of treating the **social construction of race** as central to the way that people of color are ordered and constrained in the United States, CRT has begun to move beyond the Black–White paradigm and beyond vulgar racial essentialism to consider the racialized lives of other



oppressed minorities, the daily microaggressions inflicted upon various oppressed minorities such as Latinos, Asians, gays, Indians, and women of color (p. 7).

Indeed, as previously mentioned, we find CRT applying to law, business, politics, sociology, and education (Patton, et al., 2015; Capper, 2015; Tonette, et al., 2014; Parker, et al. (2004).

In a review of the tenets of CRT, Capper (2015) provides this summary:

1. Permanence of racism (Racism, both conscious and unconscious is a permanent component of American life.)
2. Whiteness as property (Because of the history of race and racism in the United States and the role U.S. jurisprudence has played in reifying conceptions of race, the notion of Whiteness can be considered a property interest)
3. Counter storytelling and majoritarian narratives (A method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths especially ones held by the majority; majoritarian narratives are also recognized as stories and not assumed to be facts or the truth.)
4. Interest convergence (Significant progress for Blacks is achieved only when the goals of Blacks are consistent with the needs of Whites.)
5. Critique of liberalism (Critique of basic notions embraced by liberal ideology to include color blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality of the law.)
6. Intersectionality (Considers race across races and the intersection of race with other identities and differences.) (p. 795)

One of CRT's targets is the notion of so-called color blindness (For excellent summary discussions, see Ledesma and Calderon, 2015 and Mueller, 2017). Sue, et al. (2019) describe this concept as "a belief that race is not a significant factor in determining one's chances in society" (pp. 199-200). This concept is also similar to the oft-heard expression, "there's only one race, the human race." I have heard many students reflect on their upbringing saying something like, "we were colorblind in my house." Usually, this is an honorable attempt to assert that overt racial prejudices were not part of the family dynamic. However, in a bigger sense, to claim color blindness is to essentially ignore the real and present differences in races and cultures. Supporting this notion, citing Libstiz (1998), Parker & Stovall (2004) say, "The current racialized discourse in the U.S. has taken on a different form through the ideology of color-blind interpretations of law and political, social, and economic relations" (p. 170).

However, there is an alternative. Collins (2015) mentions the claim that "racism and color-blindness need not be contradictory" (p. 47). She goes on:

This claim suggests institutions that ignore race or where racial discrimination is illegal manage to replicate racial hierarchies that are just as entrenched as those established under slavery, colonialism and apartheid. This claim has catalyzed a

cottage industry of race scholarship that aims to explain the paradox that lies at the heart of color-blindness. Color-blindness, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., means treating people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. As the hard-fought response to color-conscious racism, how is it that color-blindness not only has failed to unsettle racial inequality, but as suggested by CRT scholars, may itself be culpable in upholding it? (pp. 47-48)

That alternative given due consideration, the overall connotation of color-blindness in the context of CRT is the notion that people do not or will not appropriately consider the race or culture of people (heard the phrase, “illusion of inclusion?”). If a counselor, for example, wishes to maximize his or her effectiveness to every client, the counselor will consider the context of the client’s race and cultural. In the CRT context, then, the opposite of being “colorblind” is to indeed fully recognize race and culture.

Confusing, is it not? That is why the entire discussion is so often couched in divisive rhetoric. Despite the efforts of sensitive, well-meaning, and articulate advocates, the monumental task is to overcome presuppositions.

In my classes, I require students to describe their cultural identity and the development of that cultural identity. I often encounter students who testify that overt racism was not modeled in their childhood homes. This testimony is often meant to convey that the student carries on with racist-free thoughts and behaviors. However, what often follows is a confession that the student’s knowledge of racism is academic, not experiential. Mueller (2017) in a literature review, shares terminology that describes this phenomenon: Laissez-faire racism, symbolic racism, and aversive racism (p. 220). I am reminded of an oft-heard phrase that goes something like this: “I’m not prejudice, but those people...” Not only is such denial a chief barrier to multicultural sensitivity, I can attest that teaching a naysayer is like trying to teach guitar to a tone-deaf person; not impossible, but definitely a challenge.

Prejudices reside somewhere on the continuum between idealism and realism. To utter something like, “I don’t have a prejudiced bone in my body” or “there’s only one race, the human race” seems to be a desire to claim some sort of moral high ground, even a moral superiority. It might also serve as a defense mechanism, providing a person with kryptonite against participation—perceived or real—in perpetuating any semblance of white European supremacy. No doubt, this would be a comfortable place for some to be. But it might also be evidence of denial (or ignorance) of the prevalence of social *injustice*. Enter movements like Critical Race Theory.

## **Objections and Issues**

Obviously, no balanced discussion of CRT is complete without mentioning the objections and concomitant issues. The debate is usually characterized by a move to

promote social justice in some identity groups while assailing other identity groups as transgressors (Eidsmore, 2020).

When I was an avid motorcyclist, I recall a cliché that went something like this: There are only two kinds of bikers, those who have laid their bikes down and those who haven't yet. History is replete with terms that seem to divide people into groups; often, two groups. Usually, these categories have an “us versus them” or “us and everyone else” theme (e.g., Jews and Gentiles, men and women; military and civilian, straight and gay, black and white, etc.). Historically, the categorization or labeling of races has been an evolving process. This process is part of *racialization*, which occurs when we presume to label, categorize, or even marginalize others (see Gans, 2017).

Of course, such categorization is not always accurate, at least in terms of conventional wisdom or accepted mores. For instance, what was once straight vs. gay has evolved to straight vs. LGBTQIA (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender). Without a protracted discussion, suffice it to say on one side there is “straight.” On the other side is everyone else, and the designation has grown to the extent that the acronym is now LGBTQIA+. The + is a symbol that represents sexual orientation or gender identity that is not otherwise covered by the preceding designations. Stated another way, conventional wisdom seems to say that you cannot be sympathetic to homosexuals without being equally sympathetic to transexuals (or other sexual identities covered under the +).

Perhaps this type of dichotomization has also been injected into the otherwise honorable subject of social justice. For example, in an effort to be more inclusive, some use the phrase “people of color.” I understand the intention behind the phrase, but if one is not a *person of color*, what is the alternative? The answer is obviously “white.” But at what point does a person become a *person of color*? Or, at what point is a person not white, or as some phrase, nonwhite? Spencer (1997) discusses a time in American history, between 1870 and 1920, when black ancestry was defined as “people who were not white and who had at least ‘one drop’ of black ‘blood’” (p. 1).

The racial binary is problematic, because it only gives power to those at the forefront of the dichotomy. We exercise the term “people of color” with sheer recognition for those whose identities are not constructed within the binary; and without listening to the intersectional histories, concerns, and presences of other racial groups, we are merely reassuring the racial dichotomy (Al-Yagout, 2015, *Who is a “Person of Color?”*).

Sue, et al. (2019) elaborate on the “one drop of blood” rule—or hypodescent— (p. 282) as an effort to maintain the “myth of monoracialism.”

So does the qualification of “person of color” become a matter of blood quantum, as in the way the government defines native identity (“Indian Blood”) of Americans (Sue, et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2011; Thornton, 1997; Bureau of Indian Affairs CDIB). Is it genetics? Given his lineage (white mother, black father), could Barak Obama have been

born white, or at least looking like a white man? Perhaps. If he had been born white, would we still consider him a person of color? Perhaps. Vice President Kamala Harris has been touted as the first woman of color to hold the office. Though she is the daughter of a Jamaican-born father, she has been identified as black and African American (her defenders assert that the majority of Jamaicans have African ancestry). Her mother is Indian-born, and Harris has been identified as Asian American. To debate these monikers, one must get into the weeds of a multiracial background. To be sure, with the advent of DNA tracing, many people are finding newly discovered components of their background. But the larger point is this. Who gets to claim a particular racial identity?

I had a student who divided humanity into two categories: *melanated* and *non-melanated*. She used these terms prolifically, in assignments and in communications with me and with university leadership. I am quite sure this student was attempting to incorporate biology into the person-of-color narrative. Still, beyond colloquial use of the word, her use of a biological concept seemed absurdly inappropriate; that is, people of color have melanin; white people do not. This student presumes to interpret one's level of melanin as some interpret the level of blood quantum for Native American identity. The irony was not lost on me, that my student's efforts to more clearly define *race* betrayed the same misguided motives behind the "one drop of blood" rule.

Again, harking back to our definition of race as a social construction, consider Rachel Dolezal (a cursory internet search will yield a myriad of resources/articles), a white woman, identified as black (Osuji, 2019), to the extent that she was a chapter president for the NAACP. Or consider a white man, Adam Wheeler, who changed his name to Ja Du and identified as a Filipino. Having lived in the Philippines for 3 years, I find this story particularly interesting. The rabbit trail here is the subject of transracial identity or otherwise called disambiguation. If it is accepted that the mere heartfelt identification of a race or culture is sufficient to claim membership, further absurdity can only be imagined. I have been classified as "short" my entire life. Invoking relativism, can I identify as "tall," even though this could mean I am never again visible in a group photo?

Spencer (1997), in *The New Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America*, posits that miscegenation (black and white intermixing) has been happening for centuries, pre-America. This seems easy enough to believe and is reminiscent of why 1<sup>st</sup> century (A.D.) Jews held Samaritans in disdain. The Samaritans were largely the result of Jews who survived the Assyrian captivity (722 B.C.) who intermarried with pagan Mesopotamian peoples (2 Kings 17:24-41).

This brings us back to the definition of race as "an arbitrary, socially constructed classification of individuals..." (Hays and Erford, 2018, p. 8). Essentially, the task is to navigate *racialization*—the processes involved in ascribing a racial meaning or character to persons or things (see Gans, 2017). To reiterate, phrases like "people of

color,” while seemingly existing to be inclusive, could serve to perpetuate a divide, an unnecessary *dichotomization*. Perhaps it is advantageous to include or adopt a more inclusive—or less divisive—phrase like *culturally diverse*.

Finally, one of the chief objections seems to pertain to the issue of curriculum, including K-12 and college level. On one side, there are those who interpret CRT as overt racism. In proposing legislation, Governor Ron DeSantis (2021) of Florida said, “In Florida we are taking a stand against the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory. We won’t allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other” (News release, 15 Dec 2021). I suspect the originators of CRT would vociferously argue against that interpretation.

Other states have similar legislation or *proposed* legislation. Peter Greene (2022), a contributor to Forbes, summarized “Teacher Anti-CRT Bills Coast-to-Coast.” Some excerpts:

Alabama’s State Board issued an administrative rule prohibiting public K-12 schools from offering instruction that “indoctrinates” students in certain social or political ideologies.

Arizona currently has an anti-crt law that covers state agencies. They currently have at least three bills in the pipeline (HB 2112, HB 2291) aimed at K-12 and colleges barring the promotion or advocating of certain ideas and concepts related to gender or race.

Georgia has three brand new bills pending (HB 888, SB 377, SB 375). Covering K-12 and college, they ban training classroom employees to teach, act upon or encourage particular “divisive concepts.”

Idaho was an early adopter of anti-crt law, forbidding public schools from requiring any student to adopt the usual list of Critical Race Theory ideas.

[In Minnesota,] two brand new bills (HF 2778, HF 3301) are aimed specifically at Critical Race Theory, forbidding its inclusion in either the K-12 classroom or teacher training.

Montana has in many ways bypassed these issues thanks to a state Attorney General binding opinion issued in May of last year that Critical Race Theory and certain other “anti-racism” programs are discriminatory and violate the state and US Constitutions as well as civil rights law.

In New Mexico, HB 91 specifically bans teaching Critical Race Theory, plus anything derived from it or overlapping with it. It also bans anything that creates feelings of “discomfort or guilt.”

Last November, [North Dakota] adopted a law banning Critical Race Theory “in any portion” and requiring that all instruction be “factual, objective.”

Generally—notwithstanding exceptions like the one described above—the issue seems less that CRT is a valid curriculum piece, but more of when and how to introduce it. (For arguably one of the most comprehensive treatments of CRT in academics, see *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* by Lynn and Dixon, 2013.) As I mentioned in the first paragraph of this article, some of my students found what they believed to be concepts of CRT in our textbook (Sue, et al., 2022) though the phrase *Critical Race Theory* is never mentioned. Indeed, it seems the book does articulate many of the tenets of CRT, though the information is not presented as CRT. Same goes for the Hays and Erford (2014) text.

Regardless of whether CRT is taught under the CRT flag or more surreptitiously, it is a given that CRT is taught—in some fashion—at the college level. But what about the K-12 arena? Ledesma and Calderon (2015) summarize the challenge in formulating a workable pedagogy for the K-12 age group:

Finally, it is important to note that doing CRT in the classroom, engaging in pedagogy that centers race and racism is not easy work. Quite the contrary, it engenders discomfort and pain. It is challenging to do the work of [Critical Race Pedagogy] because ultimately the goal is to unsettle and center highly charged histories and contemporary realities that the majority dismiss with narratives of colorblindness, meritocracy, or postracialism (p. 208).

Perhaps Governor DeSantis (and others) would argue that there is a level of indoctrination involved in what he perceives to be the present K-12 curriculum. The counter argument holds that K-12 students are already indoctrinated to a curricular paradigm that is still characterized by a weighty White European influence. Perhaps Mitchell (2013) captured this notion in her study which was a

...cross-cutting analysis of over 100 empirical and conceptual studies regarding the education of secondary multilingual learners and their teachers through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Specifically, it identifies four common majoritarian stories, or normative narratives that promote racist and linguistic outcomes, that are both challenged and endorsed throughout the research literature: there is no story about race, difference is deficit, meritocracy is appropriate, and English-is-all-that-matters (p. 341).

Therein lies the conundrum: the challenge of teaching the unpalatable. It is different than teaching algebra or chemistry. It is even much different than teaching counseling theories. Though they are theories, or theoretical counseling orientations, they can be taught and learned on their own merit, which is usually noncontroversial. But when we interject race and culture, it seems the tendency is to immediately take sides. This is not unlike considering climate change, gun control, capitalism, or gay marriage.

## Discussion

As I often tell my students, it is quite the challenge to address over 400 years of persecution in American history. Shortly after Europeans arrived, a systematic persecution of Native Americans and enslaved peoples began. I assert that it takes more than good will to correct centuries of dominance.

Issues pertaining to multiculturalism would be much easier to teach if we could—at least for a moment—remove the emotion associated with many of the terms. For instance, *White Privilege*, dominant culture, and yes, *Critical Race Theory*. Nonetheless, these terms and concepts are part of the discussion. To be sure, it is difficult—if not impossible—to delve into sensitive subject matter without relative terminology. What would be best is that terms and concepts could be considered without bias. But therein lies the challenge.

Whether one “believes” in systemic racism is irrelevant, as reality trumps perspective. To deny hundreds of years of systemic racism in the United States is like trying to argue the existence of a flat earth. Humans seem quite proficient at tainting issues with political and religious beliefs (think climate change and constitutional interpretation). In my “multicultural” courses, I often encounter comments like, “The U.S. has never been so divided,” or something similar. Or I encounter a person who refutes White Privilege by asserting that they had nothing to do with historic racism or that they came from humble beginnings. Such proclamations are short-sighted and betray a level of ignorance of history. It is as short-sighted as proclaiming that every American has an equal chance of success. It looks good on paper, but it is simply not true.

The origins of Critical Race Theory were immersed in an evolving discourse of civil rights, but it had an educational piece from the beginning, in an effort to add the concept of systemic racism to the discussion of multiculturalism (see Ladson-Billings, 1998 and Crewe, 2021). Indeed, it has been described as interdisciplinary, crossing “epistemological boundaries” (Lynn and Adams, 2002, p. 88). CRT has even been a tool to discuss inequality in education (Tichavakunda, 2019). Today, it has been rolled into the political narrative. One recent concomitant might be Black Lives Matter, a movement birthed in 2013 (see [blacklivesmatter.com](http://blacklivesmatter.com)). Soon thereafter, some politicians and celebrities faced backlash for uttering “all lives matter,” as the phrase was interpreted as a betrayal of the new social justice mantra. To be sure, many persecuted peoples throughout history could have embraced the same type of campaign (think, Samaritan lives matter, Jewish lives matter, Native American lives matter). Black Lives Matter, then, was seen as a social justice *movement*, not just a verbal truism.

If Critical Race Theory teaches systemic racism, adherents are bound to incite the ire of people who sense an inappropriate or unfair indictment. Some interpret CRT not as a concept in multicultural studies or an idea of social justice, but as a blanket charge of racism. That is, though people recognize racism—even systemic racism—the indictment does not include them (Vaught and Castagno, 2008). If they are not

apathetic, they fancy themselves as part of the solution, not part of the problem. Having taught multiculturalism for many years, I can attest to the difficulty of teaching the concept of White Privilege to people who either deny its existence (both historically and presently) or testify to its inapplicability (see Bohonos, 2019) for an illustrative phenomenological study).

The ongoing debate is what do we teach in our K-12 schools and when. The questions of what *and* when are perhaps illustrated by Florida's House Bill 1557, "The Parental Rights in Education Act," which was unfortunately tagged as the "Don't Say Gay" bill (though "gay" is not in the text). What is the appropriate age for various forms of sex education? Likewise, at what age should students be introduced to the difficult concepts of racism? When can students aptly grasp the gravity of history and how that history relates to the present day?

The racism issue is currently being debated under the banner of Critical Race Theory. Instead of eschewing the entire discussion as offensive, divisive, or inapplicable, I submit that we find a way of seizing these moments as opportunities for growth and for the betterment of society.

### A Christian Perspective

The Bible, God's written revelation of Himself to humankind, has one overriding theme: the plan for reconciliation of sinful humans—all humans—back to God. The opportunity for reconciliation is not limited to any race or culture. Communicating this was one of Jesus' primary goals, that though the gospel, all people can know salvation.

Jesus was a Jew by race and taught during a time when the Jewish people were subjugated by the Roman Empire. But even some Jews at the time held other races in disdain. This is illustrated by Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan women in John chapter 4. In terms of culture, Jesus' associations motivated the Pharisees to ask, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:16, NIV)?

Jesus' humility is perhaps best illustrated in Philippians 2 (the *Kenosis* passage) where Paul is reflecting on the incarnation.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he *made himself nothing* by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in



appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (vss 1-8, NIV, *emphasis mine*).

His obedience to death on a cross was even punctuated by His forgiving His tormentors (“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...’” Luke 23:34, NIV)

It is this model of humility that I propose we emulate when considering the family of humanity. Instead of being on a quest to categorize people, for whatever reason, might we benefit from getting to know our relatives better? This was a difficult lesson even for first century Christians. Remember Peter’s dream in Acts 10? The epilog of the story is Peter’s claim, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34-35, NIV).

Or recall the Jerusalem Counsel in Acts 15. Though sharing the bond of Christianity, the cultural Jews maintained that so-called Gentiles of Antioch had to be circumcised “to be saved.” Imagine the adult male Gentiles getting that news!

Finally, consider the theme of the entire New Testament book of Galatians. Within the church of Galatia, there was another concerted effort to interject racial and cultural impediments to Christianity. This prompted the apostle Paul to exclaim, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28, NIV).

The very existence of the Bible should remind us of the importance of knowing the story behind the story. I was raised in the Protestant Christian church and have a seminary degree, but readily admit to occasionally questioning some scriptures included in the canon (likewise, I wonder why other scriptures are not included). But aside from the fact that I was not included in the selection of ancient books that would eventually become the Protestant Bible, I do exercise a reliance on the authority of scripture and the *purpose* of scripture. To be sure, it is much easier to understand the historical and theological context of scriptures today than it was when the stories were being lived.

In a similar way, people today are continually trying to understand and build a context for history *and* today. For those who might think that overt racism is “ancient history,” they need go no further than to talk to people who lived in in the Jim Crow era or who have actually seen “white only” or “colored only” places and things. It is recent history. And for many, systemic racism still bears a terrible weight. Atwood and Lopez (2014) contend that “critical race theory does not aim to tell a ‘truer’ account of reality, but a more honest one” (p. 1134).

In scripture, consider the myriad of people whose minds were changed, resulting in changed hearts, then resulting in drastically changed lives. I am not surprised at all that the American Civil Rights movement had its origins in the Black church (Paradise, 2014). Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a 20<sup>th</sup>-century standard bearer of peaceful

(dare I say, Christlike) activism. That movement began to change minds, hearts, and lives, but it was certainly not the final battle in the bigger scheme of social justice. In this light, the story behind the story is still being told.

## Conclusion

One of the chief goals of social justice is to effect education and awareness that results in movements towards equality. Critical Race Theory can be seen as at least one component—albeit a significant component—in the education effort. In the United States, people seem quite accustomed to taking sides. Our bent toward creating and “respecting” dichotomies continues to be a detriment on many levels. That CRT is often described and critiqued by opposing forces is no surprise. It does not help that related, or even subordinate, issues and movements dilute the debate. For instance, part of the Black Lives Matter mission is “to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>). The dichotomies continue.

Critical Race Theory, as a school of thought, has perhaps reached maturity. As a vehicle to enlighten and educate, CRT continues the mission. It might be disappointing to many that in the popular vernacular, CRT has, in some ways, become part of the fabric of the “woke” society. Merriam-Webster describes “woke” as “chiefly US slang,” and defines it as being “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).” Consider these terms and phrases: Pregnant person; defund the police; transgender athletes; kneeling; the green new deal; cancel culture. Regardless of how the reader perceives these phrases, they have been associated with 21<sup>st</sup> century “wokeness.”

Consider the last phrase, cancel culture. Recently, my grandsons participated in Vacation Bible School (VBS) at their church in middle Tennessee. In preparation, church leaders used rainbows as a part of the VBS décor. When a parent mentioned the potential relationship between rainbows and the LGBTQI+ movement, the rainbows were removed. Has a symbol of God’s promise (see Gen 6-9; specifically, Gen 9:13) been “canceled” by 21<sup>st</sup> century symbolism?

To be sure, the United States is in the midst of yet another cultural revolution, if revolution is defined as a movement to enact significant social change. We might do well to remember that Jesus was indeed the author of such movements. He was certainly no stranger to systemic racism. And at nearly every opportunity, Jesus seemed to take the opportunity to “kick against the goads” (a phrase from Acts 26:14, KJV). My favorite climax of confrontation is found in Matthew 22 wherein we read accounts of the Pharisees persistently challenging Jesus. Ultimately, after a parade of trap-setting questions which were answered with the wisdom only Jesus could muster, verse 46

says, “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

Today, as we strive to deal with social justice, the challenge of educating the masses seems as foreboding as Jesus’ task with the Pharisees. In education, we proceed in a quest to achieve learning objectives. If we see Critical Race Theory as a school of thought instead of a movement towards further division, perhaps we find ourselves closer to achieving a learning objective. Heretofore, CRT has been kicking against the goads. After all, it is not easy for Americans to confront an uncomfortable past. Because of genealogical studies, DNA tracing, and a trove of internet resources, many people are discovering the roles their ancestors played in some dark corners of American history.

The *message* of CRT is valid and important, but perhaps it has been shrouded—almost hidden—in its contemporary delivery. If it is up to objective educators, politicians, and journalists to ensure communication of an effective message, we might be looking at a long-lasting controversy. The perpetuation of racial and cultural dichotomies (e.g., people of color versus whites) seems to only feed the division. As God’s creation, if all people realized their common ancestry and that they were created in the image of God, perhaps divisions would wane. Then, we would better exemplify the following Biblical encouragement (all scriptures from the NIV):

John 13:35	By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
John 17:23	I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
Acts 4:32	All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.
Romans 12:16	Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.
Romans 14:19	Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.
1 Corinthians 1:10	I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.
2 Corinthians 13:11	Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.
Galatians 3:28	There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 4:3	Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
Philippians 2:1-2	Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.
Colossians 3:14	And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.
1 Peter 3:8	Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

### Glossary

Glossary (Connotations, taken from this article, pertaining to Critical Race Theory)

Aberrational	Racism is regarded as atypical and therefore able to be ignored or discounted.
Ascendancy	Governing or controlling influence
Racialization	The process involved in developing and understanding racial perceptions. The process involved in ascribing a racial meaning or character to persons or things.
Race	An arbitrary, socially constructed classification of individuals and is often based on physical distinctions such as skin color, hair texture, facial form, and shape of the eye.
Social construction	Race and races are products of social thought and relations. The opposite of a social construct might be a biological reality.
Critical Race Pedagogy	Curriculum that teaches, includes, or otherwise incorporates components of Critical Race Theory.
Meritocracy	Assumes a level playing field where all individuals in society have an equal opportunity to succeed. Meritocracy also assumes that one's work ethic, values, drive, and individual attributes such as aptitude and intelligence, determine success or failure.
Systemic racism	Racism that exists or is ingrained in the mechanisms or intricacies of society including education, law, and business.

Institutional racism	Racism that is perpetuated at part of the culture of an organization or government.
Person of color	A description of persons who are not white.
Wokeness	A colloquial expression of a state of being aware, particularly as it pertains to social issues.
Intersectionality	Considers race across races and the intersection of race with other identities and differences.
Color blindness	A belief that race is not a significant factor in determining one's chances in society. A surreptitious movement towards moral superiority by denying or ignoring racism. Also called laissez-faire racism, symbolic racism, and aversive racism.
Dichotomy	A division into two. A tendency to categorize humanity into two groups.
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender.
Blood quantum	The way the government defines native identity.
Hypodescent	The "one drop of blood" rule. Between 1870 and 1920, black ancestry was defined as people who were not white and who had at least "one drop" of black "blood."
Postracialism	Having overcome or moved beyond racism; having reached a stage or time at which racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem
Linguicist	Discrimination based on language or dialect, also known as linguistic discrimination.
White privilege	Advantages that white people have by virtue of their race.

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