

# **A pastoral brief on critical theory (especially critical race theory)**

## **November 2024**

The 2023 synod convention passed the following resolution (found on p. 27 of the 2023 *Proceedings*) asking the Conference of Presidents to produce a pastoral brief on “critical theories.” The Conference of Presidents fulfilled that request in November 2024 and is now making it available to the members of WELS.

### **Subject: Memorial (2023-01), Pastoral brief on critical theories in light of Scripture**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 169

Resolution No. 03

- WHEREAS 1) all of humanity is created in the image of God and stand equally condemned in original sin before him (Genesis 9:6; Psalm 9:8; James 3:9); and
- WHEREAS 2) Jesus is the Savior of all and his church includes people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9); and
- WHEREAS 3) the concepts of justice and equality, properly understood, are thoroughly biblical (1 Kings 3:9; Psalm 82:3; Isaiah 1:17); and
- WHEREAS 4) in our world, the concepts of justice and equality have been toppled from their theological foundations and distorted; and
- WHEREAS 5) the prevalence of “critical theory”; “critical race theory”; “diversity, equity, and inclusion”; “social justice”; and related theories are causing confusion and concern; therefore be it
- Resolved, that the WELS Conference of Presidents prepare a pastoral brief emphasizing the importance of justice and analyzing critical theories in light of Scripture.

### **Synopsis of the brief**

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## **I. Summary of the brief**

In the 21st century, *identity* is no longer taken for granted. The essence of a person, who she thinks she is, now must be defined—or at least decided upon, often at an early age. This radical subjectivity was brought about by intellectual movements that led eventually, in one instance, to critical theory (CT). Critical theory only recently gained widespread attention when it was invoked in political campaigns and the popular media. Critical theory tends to be underwritten by philosophical approaches or ideologies that seek to critique and ultimately transform society by exposing underlying assumptions and power structures, especially those that sustain liberal democracy, Western cultures, the notion of scientific progress, and historic Judeo-Christian religion.

Conversely, a Christian view of truth insists that words are meaningful insofar as statements can truly correspond with a knowable objective reality. Within many critical circles, statements that have historically been treated as reliable truths are considered merely constructs that serve to keep certain groups in power. These especially include historical Christian statements on race, gender, sexuality, and identity. Needless to say, without truth in discourse there can be no biblical truth, no meaningful Christian theology, no moral truths, nor, indeed, any basis for meaningful moral reform.

Critical race theory (CRT) is perhaps the most popular field that uses critical approaches. Critical race theory began with legal scholars who wanted to understand why racial inequality persisted in America despite the successes of the civil rights movement and other reforms. Although its application has broadened considerably among critics to include all types of race-related political and cultural matters, critical race theory is typically used to refer to research and programs that seek to address the apparent failure of colorblindness to improve outcomes for minorities.

Critical race theory assumes that a person's race or ethnicity is the most fundamental part of his identity. The Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions teach the opposite: the most fundamental truth about a person's identity is not that he has certain characteristics but that he is a creature of God, originally formed in God's image, yet tragically also, since the fall, a sinner in need of God's mercy to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ and his cross. The education of children and the formation of their identity as sinners forgiven in Christ is one of our synod's most cherished—and effective—commitments. In a world in which identity is contested and narrowly defined, we must embrace our historic strength of identity formation through God's Word and sacraments. While we can critique human philosophies such as critical race theory in detail, as we will in this brief, the most effective response will be the practice of Lutheran education in our homes, congregations, and schools.

Critical race theory, like many other human philosophies, is animated by genuine human longings, desires for fairness, love, and flourishing that are perpetually frustrated by sin, the fallen world, and the devil. Personal sins and institutional evils have destroyed countless human lives and caused horrific suffering in periods of US history, and many argue that they continue to do so. Attempting to explain and address the sin of racial prejudice and discrimination in institutions and policies, critical race theorists, popularizers, and activists absolutize human *differences* like race and ethnicity, and their solutions seek to improve *human flourishing*, the fullness of life for which all people long, through power-based notions of justice intended to achieve “equity.”

A Christian understanding of *difference* recognizes that human beings share the need of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, that Christians have a new identity received by grace, and that Christ’s church has a mission to reconcile the world to God. Human differences, while acknowledged in Scripture, do not define a person as fundamentally as does our creatureliness. Although our creatureliness has been sadly corrupted by original sin, we are—amazing grace—still objects of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Thus, all human beings are equal and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

While the doctrine of justification is inseparable from the biblical concept of justice, justice is also central to the Christian’s life of sanctification in relationship to his neighbor. A biblical understanding of justice involves the righting of wrongs and the fair treatment of people, especially the poor and marginalized. But justice is only one aspect of a full biblical vision of human flourishing, a picture beautifully summed up by Jesus in the Beatitudes. This flourishing flows from faith in Christ so that the Christian recognizes his poverty of spirit and is meek, contrite, desirous of God’s righteousness, merciful, pure, and a peacemaker—primarily by bringing the forgiveness of Jesus but also through all manner of useful vocations as they relate to ethics, prosperity, health, law, policy, education and knowledge, and serving the good of God’s whole creation. When Christians live in such a way they are hugely influential: Jesus calls them the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Christians living in this way—sharing the gospel, imparting forgiveness, seeking the welfare of the city, being a light on a hill, being the salt of the earth—alleviate much suffering that results from the injustice, deprivation, condescension, and humiliation that vast swaths of the population find so depersonalizing and dehumanizing in modern societies, not least in our politics and public culture.

Humans seek to understand the words of others to overcome the challenges we face. God, in his grace and mercy, gave us the WORD (λόγος), Jesus, to live among us and to give us the truth. God’s truth, the WORD, provides us with clarity in addressing the differences people hear and see in this confused world. Christians have been given Jesus, the Word, the Way, the Truth, and the Life to share with all who have ears to hear.

This means that we, as Christians, have the most powerful and sole antidote for what ails our world. If we look past the polemical nature of public debates, we can see suffering souls who are begging for absolute truth, identity, reconciliation, hope, justification, righteousness, meaning, purpose, and belonging, often without being conscious of their desires. Through law and gospel, Word and sacrament, Christ-centered identity and a response of loving vocations, the church offers the fulfillment of all of these human desires. Ours is not a time to despair but a thrilling time to be alive. Our reaction to the current culture should be mourning but not rage, hope and not despair. In anticipation of heaven where we will join in that great multitude of those from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb—it is time to speak and act in ways that are grace-filled and restorative. This is exactly what Christ offers to us, to our neighbors, and, through us, to the world.

## II. Full-length brief

### The purpose and basic definitions

The purpose of this pastoral brief, as directed by the 2023 synod convention, is to offer evangelical guidelines to help Christians understand and respond to “critical theories” with charity and truth in a pastoral manner so that the gospel may be proclaimed to suffering souls.

The problems with critical theory and its applications have become widely known. Focusing on diversity training, for example, has done little to improve outcomes for minority populations.<sup>1</sup> The topic of “critical theory” has become a political lightning rod, provoking ardent defense on the political left and fiery denunciation on the political right—polarization that most Americans have grown tired of.<sup>2</sup> The hard-established but

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, “Why Diversity Programs Fail,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 1, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>.

<sup>2</sup> James Davison Hunter, Carl Desportes Bowman, and Kyle Puetz, *Democracy in Dark Times: The 2020 IASC Survey of American Political Culture* (New York, N.Y.: Finstock & Tew, 2020). One global periodical argued in September 2024 that America reached “peak woke” in 2020: “America is becoming less ‘woke’: our statistical analysis finds that woke opinions and practices are on the decline,” *The Economist*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/09/19/america-is-becoming-less-woke>, accessed September 24, 2024. Note *The Economist’s* helpful description of *woke*: “The term woke was originally used on the left to describe people who are alert to racism. Later it came to encompass those eager to fight any form of prejudice. By that definition, it is obviously a good thing. But Democrats seldom use the word anymore, because it has become associated with the most strident activists, who tend to divide the world into victims and oppressors. This outlook elevates group identity over the individual sort and sees unequal outcomes for different groups as proof of systemic discrimination. That logic is then used to justify illiberal means to correct entrenched injustices, such as reverse discrimination and the policing of speech. It is this sort of ‘woke warrior’ that Republicans love to lambast.” Ross Douthat interprets the same data as showing that “wokeness is more in abeyance than retreat”: “The 2024 Election Is a Retreat from Ideology,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2024,

discredited standard of colorblindness, out of favor in the academy over the last two decades, is being reasserted.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, the fascination with “postmodernity” and the triumphalist march of secularism have faltered.<sup>4</sup> This brief does not intend to join in such political, ideological, or philosophical debates but rather to provide pastoral guidance based on God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions, focusing especially on the example that Christians and our churches can offer to the wider culture. Taking this constructive, proactive approach to a cultural issue like this is vitally important. After more than 40 years of engaging the world politically, evangelical churches in America have but little to show for the countless dollars, hours, and lives invested. If any change has been affected by becoming an actor in the culture wars, it is the church’s credibility that has suffered, not least among young people. To engage productively, we must see the challenges clearly and offer compelling scriptural alternatives that make better sense of the times we live in and are more effective practically in daily life.

Although **critical theory (CT)** has been developed for decades, it only recently gained widespread attention when it was invoked in political campaigns and the popular media. By using the term *critical* we refer to **the tendency of critical theory to be underwritten by philosophical approaches or ideologies that seek to critique and ultimately transform society by exposing underlying assumptions and power structures,** especially those that sustain liberal democracy, Western cultures, the notion of scientific progress, and historic Judeo-Christian religion.<sup>5</sup> **Critical race theory (CRT)** is perhaps the most popular field that uses critical approaches. Critical race theory began with legal scholars who wanted to understand why racial inequality persisted in America despite the

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/21/opinion/trump-harris-2024-ideology.html>, accessed September 24, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman Hughes, *The End of Race Politics: Arguments for a Colorblind America* (New York: Thesis, 2024); Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023); Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, First Edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization,” *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1–2 (Spring and Summer 2006): 7–22; Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2019); Craig J. Calhoun, “Contradictions and Double Movements,” in *Degenerations of Democracy*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2022), 48–87; David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, and John Clifford Green, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 213–23; John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 158.

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, we will use critical theory to include the current ideological trends or movements that have incorporated aspects of the Frankfurt school, poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, critical legal studies, and postcolonial theory, which have all manifested to some degree in critical race theory (CRT), third-wave feminism, gender studies, queer theory, disability and fat studies, the “social justice movement,” and more popularly in the writings on race of Ibram X. Kendi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Robin DiAngelo, and certain diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

legal successes of the civil rights movement and other legal reforms. Although its application has broadened considerably among critics to include all types of race-related political and cultural matters, critical race theory is typically used to refer to research and programs that seek to address the apparent failure of colorblindness to improve outcomes for African Americans in particular. More specifically, critical race theory has sought to address *white supremacy* that seemed to be part of American institutions, systems, and policies and to advance race-conscious policies and programs that would equalize outcomes among racial groups.

**Critical theories may present a particular challenge to Christian pastors and lay people. This is largely because critical theories have the effect of *absolutizing differences between people and groups—whether differences of race, gender, ethnicity, ability, or other characteristics—into a self-defined identity, while also reducing human flourishing to a power-based notion of justice.***

Critical theories, especially in their popular versions, make differences between people fully determinative of their personal and social lives, as well as of their possibilities for the future. By doing so, they also transform the power that naturally functions between people and groups into a fundamental reality, and they interpret social experience almost entirely in terms of the ability of one group to coerce another with a goal of realizing justice. The goal of “justice” has been elevated to the status of the ultimate and all-consuming objective of life and society. As expressions of power themselves, the arguments of critical theory seek to define all human experience: in our personal relationships, in our communities and workplaces, and in our nation and public culture. Because of their totalizing claims, these theories, and especially the behaviors they provoke and animate and set loose, not to mention the cultural mode they’ve inspired,<sup>6</sup> may impinge on the Christian’s ability to love the neighbor, concretely in our private vocations and in our public vocations as citizens and employees.

Nonetheless, these movements are animated by longings for good things—for equality, justice, peace, love, and belonging. As many secular scholars have recently argued, these ideals find their roots in God’s Word.<sup>7</sup> For such reasons, Christians should not completely dismiss or deride these movements, misguided as these movements can be. “Man lives by hope,” the confessional Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse wrote, “and cannot live without hope”:

The hope of the sick for the restoration of health, the hope of the prisoner for freedom, the hope for social justice in a nation and for peace between

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<sup>6</sup> Malloy Owen, “From Frankfurt to Fox,” *The Hedgehog Review* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 30–43.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2021).

nations of the world—all these hopes are common to Christians and non-Christians, and . . . [i]t would be a grave violation of the great commandment to love our neighbor if we failed to understand these human hopes and if we refused our active participation in the lawful attempts to realize them under the pretext that there are higher things to hope for.<sup>8</sup>

What do such movements hope for, temporal as their longings may be? For “love,” “compassion,” “to feed your children [when] working three jobs,” “a world where prisons and punishment are not needed,” “a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other in love.”<sup>9</sup>

These longings are fundamentally human and reflected in Scripture. In Deuteronomy 15, for example, God makes provisions for the poor by commanding his people to be “openhanded” and to give to them generously “without a grudging heart” (Deuteronomy 15:10), even declaring a jubilee every seventh year when debts would be canceled (Deuteronomy 15:1,2). As one commentator says, “Israel will have the opportunity to show her generosity continually, because there will always be poor and afflicted fellow citizens that need an outstretched arm with a liberal hand (Deuteronomy 15:11).”<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament picks up a similar theme when James describes religion as “taking care of widows and orphans” (James 1:27), which is significant for a Christian because “[i]n showing mercy to those touched by adversity and death, Christians identify with the humility, suffering, and death of Christ” and “serve those who cannot repay such kindness, just as Christ has done for them,”<sup>11</sup> even bringing in the “nascent new age in a tangible way.”<sup>12</sup> According to the Bible, poverty has complex causes,<sup>13</sup> and Christians are

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<sup>8</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Some Thoughts on Christian Hope,” in *The Journal Articles of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison, Bror Erickson, and Joel A. Brondos (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2016), 227. Sasse had unique personal experience with such ideas. Jeopardizing his career and indeed risking his very life, Sasse in 1932 criticized the Nazi party’s platform statement that one race could be superior to another, since, he argued, all are equally fallen and all stand equally in need of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, no matter their race or ethnicity; see Guy C. Carter, “Confession at Bethel, August 1933–Enduring Witness: The Formation, Revision and Significance of the First Full Theological Confession of The Evangelical Church Struggle in Nazi Germany,” 6, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/303614736/fulltextPDF/3863B015274250PQ/1?accountid=14678&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>.

<sup>9</sup> Patrisse Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, First St. Martin’s Griffin edition (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2020), 199–200. We are emphasizing the wholesome desires; there are others as well that we would not recognize or encourage as good.

<sup>10</sup> Adolph L. Harstad, *Deuteronomy* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022), 439.

<sup>11</sup> Curtis P. Giese, *James*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021), 195. Giese connects 1:27 to the Beatitudes, noting that James uses the term “pure” to describe religion God accepts, the same term that Jesus used to describe the “heart” of his disciples.

<sup>12</sup> Giese, 196.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2004).

encouraged to alleviate suffering by caring for the poor and vulnerable (e.g., Galatians 2:10), both among believers and non-believers (e.g., Galatians 6:10). Although we realize that fulfilling such human hopes perfectly is impossible on this side of heaven, our synod has mercy and relief ministries that seek to alleviate suffering from these and other hope-crushing consequences of our fallen world.<sup>14</sup>

While **differences** and **justice** certainly have their place in God’s created order, we must return to God’s Word to understand them rightly and live lovingly toward our neighbors. We will discuss these two basic concepts and how critical theory interacts with them. Because these theories related to justice and differences arise and are applied in the context of American history and society, we will address a reasoned view of these theories also throughout our discussion.

### **Part one: Differences**

Because critical theories are animated by *differences*, we begin with examples from recent scholarship. One major history takes its title, “Stamped from the Beginning,” from a speech of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America, and re-narrates American history looking backward and forward from 1860 entirely from the perspective of racial identity. Even so, the book allows that “Black people are in reality a collection of groups differentiated by gender, class, ethnicity, dis/ability, sexuality, culture, skin color, profession, and nationality . . .”<sup>15</sup>

A prominent social scientist argues that race is not only socially constructed but also has a “social *reality*” because it “produces real effects on the actors racialized as ‘Black’ or ‘White’”—a reality that is fully determinative, even down to the level of a person’s “(racialized) soul.”<sup>16</sup> As identity is determined by racial difference, so, according to this theory, should life prospects be fixed based on racial difference. This means that, based on a popular application of critical race theory, “racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing.” What is equal footing? “[I]f Black, Native, and White people were all experiencing houselessness at a rate close to 11.2 per 10,000

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<sup>14</sup> Dan Sims, “Community Care & Compassion Matching Grants Program,” WELS Christian Aid and Relief: Community Care and Compassion Matching Grants Program, accessed March 27, 2024, <https://wels.net/serving-others/christian-aid-relief/community-care-and-compassion-matching-grants-program/>; see also Matthew C. Harrison, *Christ Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Second trade paperback edition (New York, NY: Bold Type Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, 2023), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Sixth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 9, 238.



people.”<sup>17</sup> Or the share of African-American employees in a company reflects the proportion of the population, 14.4 percent. Absolutized in these ways, differences among people become fully self-defining and self-determining—and we can have little hope that those differences could ever be reconciled.

This can be further illustrated by following the meaning of terms used to define differences that have changed significantly over the last three decades. Consider the term racism.<sup>18</sup> **Racism originally referred to a discriminatory attitude or actions directed at a person based on his or her racial group.** Over the last several decades, this kind of racism has declined dramatically. Racism, however, has taken on a new meaning; it is no longer merely a personal sin but a structural one: racism can apply to laws, policies, and institutions. It is in this sense that critical race theory scholars argue that racism is “systemic.” The anti-racism movement deems its pervasiveness to be absolute. In recent years, the concept of systemic racism has been reassigned to personal attitudes: merely by being white, for example, a person can be persistently guilty of racism. This re-application of systemic analyses to personal attitudes and actions is what many have found highly disorienting and objectionable because they themselves harbor no feelings of racial discrimination or prejudice. Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* is the clearest example of this approach:

All people hold prejudices, especially across racial lines in a society deeply divided by race. I can be told that everyone is equal by my parents, I can have friends of color, and I may not tell racist jokes. Yet I am still affected by the forces of racism as a member of a society in which racism is the bedrock. . . . I will have a white worldview and a white frame of reference.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the concept of **white supremacy** may call to mind the Jim Crow South or the Ku Klux Klan, that is, **white ideologues who believed that the white “race” was superior to other peoples**, namely those of African descent. While there may still be fringe figures

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<sup>17</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, One World trade paperback edition (New York: One World, 2023), 20.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Fabiola Cineas, “Merriam-Webster has a new definition of ‘racism,’” *Vox*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/6/10/21286656/merriam-webster-racism-definition>.

<sup>19</sup> Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 47. This is quoted in Malloy Owen, “The Unchosen Condition: Robin DiAngelo’s Peculiar Gospel,” *The Hedgehog Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 74. Owen comments: “Oluo and DiAngelo see the world gripped by a racial war of all against all in which white ignorance is nothing less than a matter of survival for white people. The tendency to understand every human action as part of a continual struggle for survival among mindless, amoral bodies is common to the Darwinian right and the Foucauldian left; for DiAngelo, white fragility is a strategy adopted by white bodies in their struggle against black ones.... We are constituted by environmental influences that make us vicious, cruel, self-seeking, no matter our intentions. On this darkling plain of eternal racial strife, the powerful protect themselves by crushing the powerless; the powerless would do the same in their place,” Owen, 74.

who believe this, public expression of such a view would (and of course should) in the 2020s be met by the harshest rebuke and correction. Rather than being applied to such outliers, though, “white supremacy” has come to be applied to institutions: to the Scholastic Achievement Test, for example, and to certain concepts like “objectivity” or “qualifications” or “worship of the written word” or “individualism” that have come to be considered “white” and thus expressions of white hegemony.<sup>20</sup>

In an enormously influential essay on reparations, Ta-Nehisi Coates argued that “white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.”<sup>21</sup> Understanding differences as ultimately pitted against each other at the deepest levels of society absolutizes race and racial identity in a way that appears, then, to be inescapable. A devastating problem with this, argues Orlando Patterson, a foremost sociologist of race at Harvard University, is that “it comes from anger and hopelessness and alienates rather than converts” because it “racializes a lot of problems that a lot of people face, even when race is not the answer.”<sup>22</sup>

The concept of **intersectionality** brings into relief differences even within one person’s identity. As Christians, we are used to thinking of ourselves as, at the same time, saint and sinner, or as a member of a profession and a Christian. There are various aspects to our identity that intersect, and those intersections have consequences for the way we live or the way we are treated; this seems quite uncontroversial. Critical race theory attempted to understand this idea of intersectionality as it relates to race and gender. The seminal article by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a student of critical race theory founder Derrick Bell, explored the discrimination faced by African American women in particular, discrimination that would be different than that faced by African American men or by white women.<sup>23</sup> While the article and ensuing literature drew heavily from postmodern theory,<sup>24</sup> politicians

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture - Still Here,” May 2021, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XR\\_7M\\_9qa64zZ00\\_JyFVTAjmJVU-uSz8/](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XR_7M_9qa64zZ00_JyFVTAjmJVU-uSz8/).

<sup>21</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631>.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Powell, “‘White Supremacy’ Once Meant David Duke and the Klan. Now It Refers to Much More,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/us/white-supremacy.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (December 7, 2015), <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “There are no right or wrong arguments, no absolute truths, only narratives or stories that are more or less relevant to the search for meaning,” *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 51-52. Kimberle Crenshaw saw her work as, “linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory.” “Mapping the Margins,” *Stanford Law Review*

and others absolutized this analysis and made it definitive of identity,<sup>25</sup> even though Crenshaw herself warned:

Focusing on two dimensions of male violence against women—battering and rape—. . . the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and . . . these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both. . . . *[I]ntersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity.* Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained *only through the specific frameworks of race and gender.* . . .<sup>26</sup>

Specifying identity groups in this way and absolutizing differences is the opposite of what Crenshaw says she intended, despite the effect that popularization has had. It is not, she says, “an effort to create the world in an inverted image of what it is now,” but rather to create “an egalitarian system.”

In short, Crenshaw doesn’t want to replicate existing power dynamics and cultural structures simply to give people of color power over white people, for example. She wants to get rid of those existing power dynamics altogether—changing the very structures that undergird our politics, law, and culture in order to level the playing field.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, when academic terms enter the political arena as they did in the 2016 election, for example, there can be little hope of preserving nuance and original intent.

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43:1241, 1991, 1244; see also 1296ff. Part 7 of *Critical Race Theory: Key Writings* is titled “Race and Postmodernism,” and focuses on the postmodern foundations of CRT’s analysis of the ideas of race, justice, and community. The postmodern literary theorist Brian McHale sees CT as a “postmodern phenomenon”: *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 97. Roderto Mangabeira Unger, an early founder of Critical Legal Studies (of which CRT is considered an offshoot) defines the chief concern of critical legal studies as the critique of “objectivism... to advance leftist aims”: “The Critical Legal Studies Movement,” *Harvard Law Review*, 96.3 (Jan., 1983): 666.

<sup>25</sup> Clare Foran, “Hillary Clinton’s Intersectional Politics,” *The Atlantic* (blog), March 9, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/hillary-clinton-intersectionality/472872/>. The citation comes from an unpublished paper from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.

<sup>26</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1243–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Coaston, “The Intersectionality Wars,” *Vox*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>.

### ***Excursus on language: How can terms shift over time?***

How can language shift dramatically in this fashion, leaving the general public feeling disoriented at the nature of the linguistic changes and the speed of them? In one year it is perfectly acceptable to make a certain statement that in the next year will earn public scorn. The reason has to do with the nature of truth itself as it is generally considered by scholars of critical theory.

In that world, *truth is a construct*. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “There are no right or wrong arguments, no absolute truths, only narratives or stories that are more or less relevant to the search for meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Some may only mean by this that *certain* opinions and practices can be described as subjective and constructed. For example, certain gender stereotypes are conditioned by cultural norms that differ across time and place. Others who argue that truth is socially constructed, though, may be communicating that *all* opinions and practices are constructed, and that we cannot say of any propositions that they are true or reflect an objective independent truth. These views have been widely critiqued and discredited by scholars since the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> As Christians we can affirm that truth delivered from the Creator is not constructed by individuals or societies. Although not on the same level as revelation, truth procured through logic, scientific discovery, and natural laws verified through scientific experimentation are true outside of social conditioning. This does not mean that these truths will not be emphasized, deemphasized, or shaded by cultural conditions. Cultural influences certainly color human knowledge. Recognizing our biases is a healthy and necessary precondition in the search for truth. This does not mean that truth itself is a construct but only that fallible and limited human minds struggle to attain it without bias. The Word of God is reliable truth. God has also ordered his world and we should expect to discover truth in it.

A Christian view of truth assumes that words themselves *are* meaningful. In critical theory, however, *words are considered unreliable for attaining the truth*. Some may only mean by this that words are not identical to the thing as the objects they are presumably denoting. Others, though, may be communicating that words are at best approximations of reality, and that those in power have used words to maintain their power. Further, they may

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<sup>28</sup> *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 51-52

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the critiques of the post-foundationalism of Richard Rorty (e.g., Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980)) and others in the work of Merold Westphal in, for example, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, J. Greco and E. Sosa, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 415-435; and Charles Taylor in, for example, “Overcoming Epistemology,” *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1995); “Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition,” *Reading Rorty*, A. Malachowski, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990, 2006); and now Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023).

answer this predicament by moving away from a society based on the idea that words can get us to truth (logocentrism). In fact, all texts should be critically examined to expose hidden hierarchies and power structures (a hermeneutic of suspicion). Several scholars have problematized such radical critiques over the last three decades<sup>30</sup> and argued, for example, that although words are not identical with what they are denoting, they are still able to deliver knowledge. Oddly, such radical critiques of language ironically refute themselves by using words to assert that words are unreliable. We can acknowledge that words can be used in an abusive manner, but it does not follow that all words are implicated in power dynamics.

Because sin has so deeply affected all of creation, the Bible commands Christians to exercise a healthy suspicion towards all human attempts at communicating truth (Romans 3:13,14; 2:6ff). We also recognize that words are powerful and can create states of affairs (e.g., the use of a racial slur or a kind word of love can change a relationship) even if the author of those words did not intend a particular result. At the same time, words are God's chosen method for communicating truth, both naturally (Acts 17:27,28) and specially (Psalm 119:105). Further, Christ, who is the Word, and through whom all things were created and are held together, provides the foundation for truth and our ability to articulate that truth through words.

While in the church we are consumed by our concern for truth, scholars of critical theory in effect change the subject if the question of truth is raised. The subject they change to is power. In a sense, *power replaces truth*. Some may only mean by this that our conscious and unconscious inclinations for self-preservation are more powerful than we may think and often shade what we take to be moral truth.

Many critical theory scholars, though, believe that individuals and groups have their own truths and morals that are no more valid than any other individual's or group's truths or morals. Therefore the primary questions should not be "What is true or false?" or "What is moral or immoral?" but rather "Who is the oppressor and who is the victim?" In this way individuals and groups maintain their freedom rather than being forced into metanarratives (overarching stories) placed on them by those in power.

We must, however, object that without truth there can be no morality and therefore there is no basis for asserting that an exercise of power is immoral. There is also no basis for moral reform. The only solution is for the victim to take power from the oppressor. This only ends up with a new oppressor and a new victim. While we can acknowledge that certain cultures emphasize certain morals and dismiss others as insignificant and that the desire for self-preservation can drive conceptions of moral truth, it does not follow that absolute

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<sup>30</sup> Consider, for example, George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

morals do not exist. The oppressor/victim dichotomy not only eliminates a true basis for moral reform, but it also provides no mechanism for forgiveness, the basis for true reconciliation. Indeed, only the Truth can set us free.

Renowned atheist philosopher John Gray argues that, according to such thinking, “victimhood confers moral authority, as it does in Christianity. . . .” Gray continues:

The difference is that in the Christian myth divinity joins itself with broken humanity, while woke liberals use the groups they choose as victims to enhance their own self-esteem . . . Woke hyper-liberalism is Puritan moral frenzy unrestrained by divine mercy or forgiveness of sin. There is no tolerance for those who refuse to be saved.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Differences: A response***

One critic of these absolutist understandings of difference identifies the crux of what is at stake: “The status quo in American public policy for the past several decades has been to use race as the *main* proxy for disadvantage.”<sup>32</sup> As many have pointed out, this approach contrasts markedly from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom when he dreamed that “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”<sup>33</sup>

What are we to make of absolutizing differences? The apostle Paul had one of the most radical changes of heart over natural human divisions. He went from pride in his birth as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” and in practicing a “blameless” life as a Pharisee under the Jewish law, to considering any of those types of status “garbage” because of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:5-7). Indeed, he became not only an apostle to non-Jewish believers (Galatians 2:7-9) but also a fierce advocate for the mission to the Gentiles, arguing against apostles who wanted converts to adopt distinctively Jewish customs (Acts 15; Galatians 2:14). This makes Paul’s teaching of “reconciliation” extraordinarily significant.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Paul addresses the topic of differences and argues for (1) an equal need, (2) a new identity, and (3) a reconciling mission.

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<sup>31</sup> John Gray, *The New Leviathans: Thoughts after Liberalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 122–23.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *The End of Race Politics*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; Part 17 of 17* (Washington, D. C., 1963), [https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/A\\_76C3B93B557D4976A032C27C72ACED18#at\\_89.00\\_s](https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/A_76C3B93B557D4976A032C27C72ACED18#at_89.00_s).

## 1) An equal need

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul teaches that Jesus Christ died for *all* (2 Corinthians 5:14,15,19). This was necessary because *all* human beings are corrupted by sin. Scripture has a high view of human beings. Recall the words of David, who marveled, “What is man that you remember him, the son of man that you pay attention to him! . . . You crown him with glory and honor. You make him the ruler over the works of your hands” (Psalm 8:4-6, EHV). Such an exalted view of humanity came from God himself: “Let us,” the Triune God said, “make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule . . . [m]ale and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26,27).

But human glory was fleeting, marred by sin at the fall. Soon Adam fathered Seth “in his own image” (Genesis 5:3), marked by original sin and falling “short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Our Lutheran Confessions teach that “all . . . are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God” (Augsburg Confession, Article II). Only Jesus Christ, the perfectly righteous Savior, could restore a right relationship between the Creator and his fallen creation, satisfying God’s justice by receiving the penalty for our sin and guilt, and giving us the righteousness achieved by his perfect life, innocent death, victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension (2 Corinthians 5:14,15,19,21). The Christian still battles the sinful self, the world, and the devil but is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) who prays, “Come, Lord Jesus,” and patiently endures affliction in joyful anticipation of the day when “every eye will see him” (Revelation 1:7) and when all Christians from “every nation, tribe, people, and language” will worship together before God’s throne (Revelation 7:9).

The key point is that all of humanity deserved God’s just wrath and that Christ took that wrath and makes his righteousness a reality for all of humanity. Paul emphasizes in 2 Corinthians 5 that the sins of the whole world have been forgiven (i.e., “not counted against them”). This is the gospel we proclaim. As it relates to need, all human beings are not different but rather are equal.

To be sure, God’s Word does not ignore differences: Christians from every nation, tribe, people, and language worship before the throne of God and the Lamb (Revelation 7:9). Those around the throne, like the Apostle John who saw the apocalyptic vision, apparently notice differences among people in heaven, so differences cannot be meaningless. But while physical differences are acknowledged in Scripture, Jesus Christ critiqued ethnic prejudices and other early first-century Judeo-Roman divisions (John 4:4-42; Luke 7:2-9), and he and the apostles extended the proclamation of God’s kingdom to everyone—Samaritans, Ethiopians, Syrians, and many others (Acts 2:6-11; Acts 8:26-39; Galatians 2:11-16), as the prophets had done before them (John 4:11; Isaiah 2:2,3; Isaiah 11:9,10; Isaiah 52:10; Jeremiah 16:19-21).

In the broader ancient world, such human differences were taken for granted as *permanent* divisions, even in the superficially cosmopolitan culture of the Roman empire.<sup>34</sup> The idea that the church would be a multiethnic, multiracial community was radical and ultimately transformative in the Western tradition.<sup>35</sup> In the church, all are equal.<sup>36</sup>

While these truths are fundamental for the Christian, we cannot help but be shaped by the culture in which we live and seek to share the gospel (Romans 12:2). In the United States of America where most WELS congregations exist, equality as a concept was established by the American framers at the beginning of the nation. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” the U.S. Declaration of Independence asserts.

Despite this praiseworthy view of the human person as created with equal status, self-conscious compromises devalued the humanity of African peoples and others, which a 19th-century culture war, a civil war, a period of reconstruction, and the civil rights movement would seek to redress.<sup>37</sup> As both conservative and progressive historians and leaders have argued, the founders themselves recognized the inherent flaws in how American equality was applied, and they bequeathed to future generations the challenge of resolving inequality under the law.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the aspiration to *radical* equality from

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<sup>34</sup> In general, race-based slavery did not exist in the ancient world. Although in the *Politics* Aristotle offers “an early Greek attempt to define slavery on racial lines,” the “practice of slavery in ancient Greece clearly did not coincide in any comprehensive way with race”: Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31. This did not change in the Roman world: e.g., Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26. On views of race in particular, see for example Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970): “The Greco-Roman view of blacks was no romantic idealization of distant, unknown peoples but a fundamental rejection of color as a criterion for evaluating men,” 216; “There is nothing in the evidence, however, to suggest that the ancient Greek or Roman established color as an obstacle to integration into society,” 217-18. More recent literature detects “proto-racism” in Greece and Rome (Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)), though how this relates to modern racism or the extent to which such attitudes may have been reflected beyond rarefied literature are contested issues, as several reviews of Isaac’s book argued.

<sup>35</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, Reprint edition (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 77-94.

<sup>36</sup> Note that prominent antiracism scholar and advocate Ibram X. Kendi acknowledges that “St. Paul equalized the souls of the enslaved and enslaver” and that “this powerful combination gave the colonial founders a justification for ideas that would come to define America”: *Stamped from the Beginning: A Graphic History of Racist Ideas in America*, First graphic edition (Emeryville: Ten Speed Press, 2023), 20.

<sup>37</sup> See James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 108-41, 195-201.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Wilfred M. McClay, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019), 115-17, 124-29; “Transcript: Condoleezza Rice Discusses Race,” *Face the Nation* (New York, New York: CBS, June 7, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-condoleezza-rice-discusses-race-on-face-the-nation-june-7-2020/>.



the beginning of the country was historically unique and has endured to the present day, and this equality was in no small measure derived from America's unique "hybrid Enlightenment" that accommodated both secular and Judeo-Christian notions of human nature.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the Bible teaches both an exalted view of humanity based on God's original creation and on Christ's sacrifice, and at the same time an utterly low view of humanity based on original sin and the ongoing grip of the "old creation," which Paul says has passed (2 Corinthians 5:17), even as he exhorts the Corinthian believers to "be reconciled" to God (2 Corinthians 5:20) and "not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). All human beings are equally dead in original sin, all human beings stand equally justified before God by the reconciling righteousness of Jesus Christ. What's more, Christians also are humbled by the daily need for reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness. Human beings are equal in their need for God's grace.

## 2) A new identity

Because of Christ's reconciliation for all and the compelling love that we have received (2 Corinthians 5:14,15), Paul says Christians have a new identity. Two features are salient: (a) the new identity is *received* and (b) the new identity puts Christians out of step with the old identity and the culture of which it is a part.

(a) That new identity is *in Christ* based on the righteous status of the Christian before God (2 Corinthians 5:21), meaning it is *achieved* by Christ and *received* by the Christian. Because Christians have this new identity, we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). Acting out of the old identity, people naturally evaluate others based on observable characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, political views, and the like. These tendencies are partially determined by our culture, what the world around us values and therefore presses upon us as part of its pattern for our lives, which Paul urges Christians not to be conformed to (Romans 12:2).

(b) The Christian's received identity puts him in conflict with the dominant culture. Most WELS congregations serve in the United States and are therefore tempted by the cultural inducements of American society, not least in how we think about identity. Like any earthly society, America's founding was partially corrupted by the limitations of its historical moment. In the case of 18th-century America, the founders largely believed the Enlightenment assumption that human reason could overcome the flaws that had undermined previous civilizations.

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<sup>39</sup> See Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis*, 53-74, esp. 69-72 on John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

This has had dramatic implications for the American concept of identity. The seemingly innocent Enlightenment slogan “dare to know” or “think for yourself” (*sapere aude*) has in complex ways over more than two centuries morphed into the modern belief that morality comes not from an authority outside us but rather from *within* us, and that we must throw off all *external* standards and define right and wrong for ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

This practice of “expressive individualism,” as one leading social scientist called it, has intensified in our day so that now *each person* is expected not only to define his own moral standards but to create his own *identity*. Because today it is self-generated, personal identity has become inherently fragile. But God created human beings with a social nature, so a self-defined identity is not sufficient or psychologically satisfying. Modern people, therefore, look for their self-constructed identity to be validated by those around them and by the broader society, including those perceived to be in power. Often the failure—real or perceived—of one’s identity to be recognized by others constitutes a personal affront.<sup>41</sup> Rage and resentment follow.<sup>42</sup>

By contrast to a self-defined identity, Christianity understands that God created human beings in his own image. Though we are now corrupted by sin we are nevertheless objects of God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. The bedrock of a Christian’s identity rests on Christ and, through the gospel, on one’s adoption as a child of God in baptism. It does not arise within us but is grounded on God’s work outside us. It is thus stable, unchanging, and defines a person more fundamentally than does race, ethnicity, gender, viewpoint, or political party.

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female . . .” (Galatians 3:28). “From one man he made all the nations . . .” (Acts 17:26). “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles . . .” (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). These verses mean that

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<sup>40</sup> Social scientists and philosophers have called this phenomenon expressive individualism, the ethics of authenticity, and emotivism.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43–53. Note especially Taylor’s point that “What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which this can fail. And that is why the need is now *acknowledged* for the first time. In premodern times, people didn’t speak of ‘identity’ and ‘recognition,’ not because people didn’t have (what we call) identities or because they didn’t depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such” (p. 48).

<sup>42</sup> The technical term, originated by Nietzsche, is *ressentiment*, which, according to Scheler, is “the repeated experiencing and reliving of a particular emotional reaction against someone else. The continual reliving of the emotion sinks it more deeply into the center of the personality, but concomitantly removes it from the person’s zone of action and expression. It is not a mere intellectual recollection of the emotion and of the events to which it ‘responded’ —it is a re-experiencing of the emotion itself, a renewal of the original feeling.” The term also “implies that the quality of this emotion is negative, i.e., that it contains a movement of hostility.” See Max Scheler and Manfred S. Frings, *Ressentiment* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007), 20–21.

despite any other differences, Christians share with other Christians a foundation in Christ, and Christians share with non-Christians a similar state of sin and “one blood,” as Martin Luther King Jr. would say, invoking Acts 17:26. God’s Word critiques all societies, and the gospel transforms people from all cultures, races, and ethnicities—Jews or Greeks or Americans.

Our only legitimate boast as human beings exists in the cross of Jesus Christ. The Christian finds his life in the cross because he was just as dead in sin as his non-Christian neighbor and still must contend daily with his sinful nature. And a Christian still needs the gospel just as much as a non-Christian. We share a common need for God’s mercy and forgiveness, and God’s law judges us all equally, just as Jesus Christ forgives all equally through the gospel.

Alongside this common identity in Christ, each believer is unique. The body is not made up of one part but of many and each part is uniquely positioned and gifted to serve and to be served (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). The Christian church’s common identity in Christ does not diminish the unique identity of her individual members. A Christian identity based on the gospel, then, subverts any other characteristics and forms the foundation of any person’s self-understanding.

Therefore, unlike a modern identity, a Christian identity is secure because it is *not an identity I create or achieve*, but rather one I *receive* through Jesus Christ by grace. No other religion, philosophy, nation, racial or ethnic group, or activist agenda can offer such a strong identity, since those other identities are typically based on good behavior, physical characteristics, adherence to group norms, or human ideals. Therefore, while race and ethnicity are human attributes, any attempts to reduce human beings to racial or other characteristics alone must be rejected as antithetical to the gospel and contrary to God’s Word. Christians should espouse the robust, multifaceted, holistic anthropology of the Bible and our Lutheran Confessions, resisting any attempt to reduce identity merely to race, ethnicity, political party, philosophy, or any other earthly characteristic.

### 3) A reconciling mission

Having been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and therefore having received a new identity, Paul says the Christian now has a “ministry of reconciliation” as an ambassador of Christ, making an appeal to the world to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:19,20). In other contexts, the term Paul employs here (καταλλαγή) was used in diplomacy to describe a change in status from enemy to friend. One party judges the other to be worthy of

becoming an ally. One party attributes to the other, recognizes in the other, or credits to the other sufficient qualities to become a compatriot.<sup>43</sup>

This concept of reconciliation lands us in the territory of the ancient idea of “equity.” However, the original concept of equity was applied to *personal* relationships, not to institutions or states directly, as it tends to be used in critical race theory. The fourth-century B.C. Greek philosopher Aristotle used *equity* (ἐπιείκεια) when speaking of friendship, specifically friends who have a use for each other.<sup>44</sup> Friends typically do not bring the same assets to a friendship, so they can complement each other’s abilities and qualities. One friend may have more money or more prestige or more technical know-how. *Equity* referred to the generous, even self-sacrificial, sharing of what one has with a friend who lacks that thing. In the context of a political community, on Aristotle’s notion, equity goes beyond the strict demands of justice and requires the kind of ethical innovation that is based on character rather than rules.

This Aristotelian ideal links up surprisingly well with a biblical understanding of justice. When the psalmist says that God judges the peoples with “equity” (Psalm 67:4, 75:2, 96:10, 98:9, 99:4), he is referring to how God uses a fair standard, which is a common understanding of justice in the Bible as we will see below. But throughout the Psalms and elsewhere, no nation can measure up, no people group, indeed no individuals, can meet God’s standard. The invocations of justice in these psalms point forward to Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice made it possible that “[n]ations which had heard of the greatness of the Lord only as a distant rumor now see his salvation with their own eyes.”<sup>45</sup> Psalm 99, with its king who “loves justice,” who “established fairness” and “carried out justice and righteousness” (Psalm 99:4), echoes Psalm 62, according to John Brug, and establishes that “God tempers his strength with mercy.”<sup>46</sup> Unlike the ancient pagan definition of “equity” in which each party brings strengths to a friendship or alliance, God brings *his* righteousness, through Jesus Christ, to his just judgment of his Christians, who bring nothing but their sin.

Recognizing our spiritual impoverishment, God reconciled us to himself in Jesus Christ and then gave to his people the ministry of reconciliation on behalf of Jesus. This ministry of reconciliation outshines anything else, especially anything related to a worldly perspective (2 Corinthians 5:16). In Corinth, distinctions based on social status and

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<sup>43</sup> See a similar idea – one party “giving up its anger” against the other – in Stanley E. Porter, *Paul and His Theology* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 132–33.

<sup>44</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown V. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73-150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 189, commenting on Ps 98:9.

<sup>46</sup> Brug, 192–93, commenting on Ps 99:4.

patronage manifested themselves in the church, especially in how the Corinthian church celebrated the Lord's Supper, and Paul challenged these distinctions vehemently.<sup>47</sup>

The motivation for reconciliation is love: "Christ's love compels us," Paul says, "because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). The love that motivated Jesus Christ to pay the ultimate price of his perfect life to save us from our sins now motivates all believers to make an appeal to all on behalf of Christ, that he has died for them and has reconciled them to God through his death. Referring to this passage in 2 Corinthians about God reconciling the world to himself, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "The cross is the boundless bridge of God's love connecting time and eternity, man and God."<sup>48</sup> God's closing the ultimate gulf compels Christians to extend reconciliation to those who do not know Jesus Christ and his blessings of a new identity and a new life.

The net effect of 2 Corinthians 5 for our understanding of difference is to declare all human beings equal regardless of fleshly characteristics but also to preserve the uniqueness of each person. *We should not miss the enormous contribution this concept brings to any society.* Attempting to establish a philosophical foundation for human equality, some scholars reach for a similar idea. For example:

We must not lose sight of individuality and distinction, and it is important to identify range properties that allow these things to sparkle. It is a basis for equality that we are looking for, but it is equality as applied to the individuality, distinction, and uniqueness of each of the billions of persons who are said to be our equals.<sup>49</sup>

In summary, while critical race theory and its applications tend toward dehumanizing people with categories and quotas, Christianity provides a common identity that empowers uniqueness and realizes true freedom.

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<sup>47</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2000), 6–12, 860–62.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Impassable Gulf (The Parable of Dives and Lazarus)," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church" (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, October 2, 1955), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Waldron, *One Another's Equals: The Basis of Human Equality*, 1st edition (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2017), 172.

## Part two: Justice

What does this new life look like? In secular circles, dissatisfaction with relativistic and instrumentalist ethics<sup>50</sup> has brought greater attention to the ancient Greek concepts of *justice* (τό δίκαιον) and *human flourishing* (εὐδαιμονία). What does it take to flourish or to become who you are truly meant to be? Flourishing is typically thought of as *happiness*. In the Western world at least, the chief goals of life are typically thought of as living in a state of satisfaction and raising kids, if any, who are happy. Discussions of happiness usually invoke *freedom*: to be happy is to be free of all constraints, to do whatever I want. Increasingly, flourishing is also being linked to *justice*. Today, flourishing means to have or experience or enact *justice*, or to overcome injustice.<sup>51</sup>

Critical scholars and activists often aim at “a more just society.”<sup>52</sup> Some take more ambitious goals of reparations, or proportional or group-comparable levels of employment, household income, incarceration, college admissions, average salary, management representation, and the like. In general according to such theories, justice is defined primarily in terms of **equity (that is, equal outcomes)** according to identity groups, which means discriminating according to constructed identity group markers. To seek justice is to even out the disparities between oppressor and oppressed groups, or to seek *equity* through policies that disproportionately benefit members of oppressed groups over oppressor groups. Further, attempts to establish the liberal aim of **equality (that is, equal opportunity for all which may result in unequal outcomes)** may on the surface appear fair, but they disregard the advantages and privileges some people possess. The *just* solution is prescribing policies that result in equal outcomes. But for the Christian, civil justice is far more robust than establishing policies of equity. It may involve at times addressing societal inequalities, but it also addresses personal responsibility and volition.

Perhaps the most concrete popular proposals to advance critical race theory in public policy have come from Ibram X. Kendi. Kendi proposes:

if racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor of or against an individual based on that person’s race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. If discrimination is creating equity, then it

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<sup>50</sup> James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky, *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents--and What They Mean for America's Future*, First Atria Books hardcover edition (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 267–77, 315–24, 378–92, 435–38.

<sup>52</sup> Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case against Race Reductionism*, The Jacobin Series (London New York: Verso, 2020), 172.

is antiracist. Another term for antiracist discrimination that leads to equity is “positive discrimination.” Another term for racist discrimination that maintains inequity is “negative discrimination.”<sup>53</sup>

In other words, to quote Coleman Hughes’ recent response to what Hughes calls “neoracism,” “Kendi endorses the logic of taking an eye for an eye. He supposes that the way to remedy a harm is by imposing an equal and opposite harm—that the way to remedy one kind of injustice is by replacing it with another kind of injustice . . .”<sup>54</sup>

Underneath these goals is often the desire, according to a prominent literary scholar, for “recognition,” a word

whose etymology means to know *again*, to recognize, that is, to re-know, re-learn, the truth of human equality, a truth that we all possess in childhood before losing it to someone else’s animus or ideology, or to the encroachment of our own prejudice or self-interest. . . . [I]t signifies the dream by which Dr. [Martin Luther] King was possessed: to repair what he called the broken ‘network of mutuality’ that was, according to his religion, both the origin and destiny of humankind.<sup>55</sup>

A modest statement of human flourishing as justice is to “open opportunities, both from social movements and from the government,” which then “creates an environment in which [a diverse workforce] can flourish.”<sup>56</sup> An extreme version of this definition of justice is “to work with and for the oppressed . . . , join social movements as well as help bring them to the fore, and help craft ‘radical theory’ and radical knowledge to assist the social movements that are trying to change the world”<sup>57</sup> which could “advance a ‘racial utopia,’ . . . a new, nonracist, multicultural culture.”<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, a Christian understanding of flourishing is more holistic than merely happiness and justice as it can be achieved on earth: it is, rather, to live into our full humanity in Christ. “To be fully human,” confessional Lutheran theologian Joel Biermann writes, “is to be righteous before God and before humanity; that is, to be fully human is to be rightly related to God and to humanity, to Creator and to creation.”<sup>59</sup> Both passive and

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<sup>53</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Trade Paperback Edition (New York: One World, 2023), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Hughes, *The End of Race Politics*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Delbanco, “On Reparations,” *Liberties - A Journal of Culture and Politics* 3, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 28–29.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, *Getting to Diversity: What Works and What Doesn't* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 248–49.

<sup>58</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. (Fortress Pr, 2014), 155.

active righteousness are essential to full human flourishing.<sup>60</sup> We have already discussed passive righteousness, the righteousness we receive in our baptism from God through the merits of Jesus Christ. We do nothing to achieve this kind of righteousness; we only receive it through faith.

By contrast, *active* righteousness involves our efforts as creatures in God's creation. These efforts involve many spheres in the temporal realm; those related to truth, goodness, beauty, as well as to prosperity, and to health and conservation of God's creation. Respectively, these spheres encompass human knowledge and learning; social mores and ethics; creativity, aesthetics, and design; economic life; and natural and physical health.

These spheres also include justice, which is the realm of political and civic life, including care for the poor and vulnerable. It is to this realm that critical theories typically relate because they are concerned with power dynamics in society. Before discussing how this is the case, we must first remind ourselves of the biblical understanding of justice and its relation to power.

To begin with, civil justice is far more robust than establishing policies of equity. It may involve at times addressing societal inequalities, but it also addresses personal responsibility and volition. A definition of justice too narrow will only result in injustice in other areas. Although Christian freedom allows us to debate the merits of equitable policies, Christian doctrine does not allow us to limit our definition of justice to equity. Biblical justice is wrapped up in the righteousness of Christ who provides true reconciliation through grace. This begins with a recognition of the shame of sin and the damage it does. The mode of Christ's execution (a shameful crucifixion) is not only the payment for sin but a recognition of the shameful nature of sin and the damage it does. The cross not only established reconciliation between the sinful human being and a holy God; it also established reconciliation between sinful humans. Christ makes sinners righteous in his blood, and here and only here, is eternal justice attainable.

Justice, according to one important way it is used in the Bible, means to give a person her due (Romans 3:25, Deuteronomy 21:1-9, Proverbs 20:22, Leviticus 19:15).<sup>61</sup> Human beings will receive what we are due, based on our sinful state and corrupted works: hell and eternal separation from our holy God. But the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to Christians, so we do not receive what we are due but rather what Christ is due, full

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<sup>60</sup> For a full exposition of a Lutheran ethical framework with three kinds of righteousness (governing, justifying, conforming), see Biermann, 148–58.

<sup>61</sup> This definition comports with elements of an Aristotelian concept of justice and of a rights-based conception of justice. See Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).



fellowship with God and the promise of eternal life with him. Apart from the doctrine of justification, biblical justice involves at least (1) treating people fairly and (2) righting wrongs that have been committed (Acts 16:35-39, 25:10,11; Romans 3:25,26; Isaiah 1:17; Job 29:12-17; Ezra 18:5-8; Isaiah 58:6-7). The latter concept, corrective justice, is the goal of government through laws, courts, and the criminal justice system (Augsburg Confession, XVI). The first concept, acting justly, is an ethical one that involves *equality* and *generosity*. *Equality* is essential because Christians are not to treat people differently depending on race, class, gender, ethnicity, or any other characteristics, but rather are to serve all equally by loving their neighbors (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). *Generosity* is necessary because there are natural inequalities among people: some people have more of various kinds of goods (money, honor, prestige, friends, access) and some have less; some are *not* in need of more and others *are* in need of more (e.g., Luke 10:33-37). Christians, having received God's justice through Christ's merit, are obligated to be generous toward others in need (e.g., James 2:15,16; Acts 20:35), not only with Christians but with all their neighbors (Galatians 6:9,10), including the poor and the marginalized (e.g., Galatians 2:10).<sup>62</sup>

That some have and others do not have leads us to the idea of power, which is "inherent to our nature as human beings and is part and parcel of human experience."<sup>63</sup> The use of power in the natural world is essential to humanity's survival but is also an "expression of the relationship of human beings to each other." Each human being's capacities to act in and influence the world differ from others, and this creates the need for people to depend on others who have capacities different from their own. This means that "power is asymmetrical": "Someone, some group, some institutions will always have a greater capacity to acquire resources than others," and sometimes their power is expressed in their ability to "deprive others of the ability to act or accumulate." Power, then, is *not a thing in itself* as recent philosophers have argued but is a *facility* that every person exercises in their relationships with others and in their spheres of influence, within social groups, and in social structures like the family or the market economy. The ultimate expression of power is the ability to define reality and to determine public standards, such as what is acceptable to say publicly, what language is offensive, and so on. The struggle over this kind of power is the source of much cultural conflict in America today.

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<sup>62</sup> Paul's emphasis on the theme of helping and serving the poor is difficult to overstate; see Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> The following discussion draws from James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177-84.

In the cultural mode of critical theory, justice and power are often closely linked. One group presumed to have less power than another group seeks to enact justice to achieve greater power, often at the expense of the other group. In this context, the language of “oppressor group” and “oppressed group” is often introduced. Such groups are now typically organized based on race, political party, ideology, and the like. In our culture, power is often expressed not by physical violence but by *symbolic* violence, through verbal and social media attacks and “canceling,” which are “forms of coercion that are effected without physical force.”<sup>64</sup>

### ***Justice: A response***

Some social scientists are pulling back from this power-based notion of human meaning and activity. A leading political theorist recently linked human flourishing to “power-sharing liberalism” across political institutions, the economy, and civil society in ways that acknowledge the need for “recognizing and submitting to a set of limits that come from laws, shared cultural practices, social norms, and organizational protocols.”<sup>65</sup> An epidemiologist’s recent study of human flourishing found that the necessary dimensions of flourishing are “happiness and life satisfaction,” physical and mental health, “meaning and purpose,” “character and virtue,” “financial and material stability,” and “close social relationships.”<sup>66</sup> A sociologist recently drew on personalist philosophy to argue for a rich conception of human flourishing that included as its “final necessary condition *and* experience” of flourishing as the “giving of oneself for the genuine good of others in the form of care, affection, and commitment to their well-being, motivated not for self-regarding or instrumental reasons, but primarily to promote the true welfare and happiness of the other, and often to enjoy interpersonal communion with them.”<sup>67</sup> When one is in the state of blessedness that God’s Word describes, the elements of human flourishing are naturally fulfilled, not with material prosperity or perfect physical health, although God has promised to provide what we need, but the contentment, joy, and friendship that would

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<sup>64</sup> Hunter, 178. Note this analysis from Hunter’s more recent work: “The most obvious and also the most pervasive mechanism for protecting the power, privilege, and status of the new meritocrats, though, would be through the development of distinct linguistic innovations – ways of speaking (politically correct speech codes – words like *Latinx*, *whiteness*, *lgbtqia2s*, and *uterus-bearer*) and thinking (woke attitudes toward defunding the police and so on) that would distinguish ‘upper whites’ from ‘lower whites,’ who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out.’” *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis*, 243.

<sup>65</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 33, 63.

<sup>66</sup> See Tyler J. VanderWeele, “On the Promotion of Human Flourishing,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 31 (August 2017): 8149, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>.

<sup>67</sup> Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 213.

make any apparent lack of earthly blessings an insignificant deprivation compared with the spiritual blessings and future hope that God will set all things right according to his justice. How so?

Jesus provides a concrete picture of a flourishing life, and in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that we studied above, Paul may well have had in mind Jesus' first description of life as a "new creation," a person who goes from deadness and languishing to life and flourishing. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus explains to his disciples, those who had just repented (Matthew 4:17) and were brand new in their faith, what the life of salvation looks like.<sup>68</sup> This is a description of a *fully flourishing life*, a life in Christ's kingdom—a beatific life, or a "blessed" life,<sup>69</sup> based on the Beatitudes, the first part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:3-11)

The sermon is directed to Jesus' disciples, but the crowds may also have been within hearing distance (5:1). The first and third beatitudes describe the universal human

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<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 234.

<sup>69</sup> For an ethical system, "asherism," built on the beatitudes and Psalm 1, offered as an alternative to positive psychology, see E. T. Charry, "God and the Art of Happiness," *Theology Today* 68, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 238–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573611416701>.

condition: “All people objectively *are* ‘poor in spirit’ and meek.’ When any man comes to know that about himself, he enters by the doorway. When any woman approaches Jesus by way of the Beatitudes, she receives the present blessing offered by Jesus, she possesses the reign of God’s gifts, and she will on the Last Day receive all things.”<sup>70</sup> The baptism of infants “is a perfect illustration . . . [wherein] Jesus gives [little ones] the present blessings of his reign and promises to them that they will inherit the earth.”<sup>71</sup>

The Greek term that is translated “blessed” (μακάριος) refers to the state of the Christian. It is the same word Jesus used to describe Peter when he confessed that Jesus is the Christ: “*Blessed* are you, Simon son of Jonah . . .” (Matthew 16:17). The first four beatitudes describe the empty state of the human being: spiritually impoverished, mourning, humble, and, only by God’s enabling, desirous for Christ’s righteousness. The blessings available are not only heavenly: the meek will inherit *the earth*, which points forward to a new earth (Matthew 19:28) and to the final judgment (Matthew 25:31,32) when “those who have suffered oppression at the hands of wicked forces and wicked men will receive the blessings of God’s great reversal.”<sup>72</sup>

The next verses describe the actions of a Christian that naturally flow from faith that is in Christ alone: “By the power of their union with Jesus, his disciples have all begun to be ‘merciful,’ ‘pure in heart,’ and ‘peacemakers’ (Matthew 5:7-9).”<sup>73</sup> Because of the greatness of the mercy they have received, Jesus’ disciples will exhibit mercy to others, primarily in granting forgiveness as they have been forgiven, knowing that “on the Last Day they will receive” God’s mercy “in all its fullness.”<sup>74</sup> Those with pure hearts know the true God because “Jesus has called them” and “the realities . . . of the reign of heaven in Jesus are being revealed to them.”<sup>75</sup>

Likewise, those who have received *peace* with God through the forgiveness that the gospel provides will proclaim that good news of peace to others. Certainly those in the public ministry “make peace” in their vocations as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, and so do laypeople by sharing the gospel and by serving in their vocations in ordinary life: “Jesus’ disciples will be active peacemakers in any number of ways. . . . [I]n their worldly and godly callings, Jesus’ disciples will have opportunity to work for the restoration of

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<sup>70</sup> Gibbs, *Matthew 1*, 245.

<sup>71</sup> Gibbs, 245n35.

<sup>72</sup> Gibbs, 244.

<sup>73</sup> Gibbs, 254. Note that the Beatitudes “do not make ethical demands, nor do they primarily exhort” (255). Rather “the subject of the main clause in every verse describes those whom Jesus has called to be his disciples.”

<sup>74</sup> Gibbs, 247.

<sup>75</sup> Gibbs, 251.

wholeness in many ways.”<sup>76</sup> This broader understanding of peacemaking fits with God’s call through Jeremiah to his people in exile: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7).

The word translated “peace and prosperity” is *shalom*, which denotes here both peace from knowing the one true God (Jeremiah 29:11-13) and peace in the civil order and society (Jeremiah 29:7). And by *seeking* shalom, God’s people are meant to be intent upon it, to be passionate and relentless about peace. Isaiah’s exhortation pertains here: “Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:16b,17). Commenting on this verse in Isaiah, our Lutheran Confessions teach that seeking justice and correcting oppression do not merit forgiveness, but rather the confessions assert that “such works are necessary in the new life” (Apology V 137).<sup>77</sup>

Proclaiming Jesus’ peace in this way will not provoke indifferent responses, so the final Beatitudes promise blessing for those who are persecuted because of Jesus Christ. Despite the promise of the ultimate victory over sin, death, and the devil, Jesus’ disciples will not be triumphalist. Rather, they will necessarily face suffering because the “present reign of God in Jesus . . . is a hidden reality that can only be known to those to whom it is revealed.”<sup>78</sup>

What we see from the Beatitudes, then, is a rich portrait of human flourishing which certainly includes justice, and especially eschatological justice. But flourishing according to Jesus is much broader than only justice. Flourishing involves bringing peace through all manner of useful vocations as they relate to ethics, prosperity, health, law and policy, education and knowledge, and it serves the good of God’s whole creation.

What effect would this have? Jesus’ sermon moves immediately to metaphors of influence: his blessed Christians flourishing in this way are the *salt* of the earth and the *light* of the world (Matthew 5:13-15), with the result that those who do not know Jesus Christ see such good works and glorify God (Matthew 5:16). This means that these

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<sup>76</sup> Gibbs, 253.

<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that “works done in the world” to “preserve the creation” under the First Article of the Apostle’s Creed “are entirely sufficient when done in accord with God’s justice and for the good of the neighbor,” argues Joel D. Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). “One does not need to introduce or highlight a peculiarly Christian imprint for a work to be worthy of Christians . . .” Engaging “wholeheartedly in a virtually limitless array of worthy and necessary work for the sake of the world’s exceedingly great sorrows and suffering” is not, Biermann argues, “in any sense, a form of social gospel—in truth, it is not the gospel at all!” Rather, such works of love are undertaken in a Christian’s vocations as redeemed creatures and citizens of the communities, states, country, and world about which God cares. See pp. 158–63.

<sup>78</sup> Gibbs, *Matthew 1*, 254.

witnesses to Christians' fruits of faith would do nothing less than reorder their loves based on God's kingdom (Matthew 5:17–6:34, especially 6:33), thus glorifying God. Christians living in this way—seeking the welfare of the city, being a light on a hill, being the salt of the earth—would alleviate much suffering that results from the injustice, deprivation, and humiliation that vast swaths of the population find so depersonalizing.

Almost no other concept defines the American public sphere as well as “culture wars.” The originator of the term *culture wars* in English, James Davison Hunter, recently published a major study of American democracy, a bookend to the original 1991 book *Culture Wars*. How do we move beyond political polarization? The question vexes many in our circles, and it is of deep concern to our neighbors in society. Moreover, our society's inability to overcome polarization may well threaten the blessings of religious freedom we have enjoyed. The answer is complex, but part of it, Hunter argues, will require a re-affirmation of our commonly shared humanity. What is needed is to “rediscover human beings under the abstractions of our inflammatory symbolic politics,” which is “a project of retrieval, addition, and re-formulation.”<sup>79</sup> The focus on the *human* is essential because it resists the reductions of the human person to race, ethnicity, or other characteristics, and it centers our public ethics on flourishing that cannot be reduced to a singular good such as justice.<sup>80</sup>

Consonant with our two kingdoms doctrine that recognizes the distinctive activity and purposes of God in his world and in his church, this affirmation of our common humanity would recognize the “incontrovertible plurality of the late modern world and its irreducible particularity,” the undeniable diversity of human societies today and the distinctiveness of the various traditions and cultures that comprise them. In the civil realm, such an emphasis on our common humanity would honor the multiplicity and the profound depth of religious and philosophical traditions that are bound together by a common affirmation of human frailty, need, proneness to error, and suffering, but also in part by the universal questions human beings have posed for millennia about the nature and purposes of life,

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<sup>79</sup> Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis*, 379–80.

<sup>80</sup> Defining the human and what it means to be “fully human” is a central concern of CRT, as demonstrated early in a text by Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, that helped to popularize CRT, as we have mentioned. Kendi writes, “To be fully human, socially, is to recognize a fundamental connection between ourself and every human being on earth. Which is to say every human being is a member of our extended family; we value the lives of all human groups equally, no matter their skin color. To be fully human, politically, is to think about human rights, about what all humans need to live fulfilling lives, and what powerful forces constrain humans—in this case the force of racism. To be fully human is to use our power to join with other humans to challenge the forces that prevent the full flowering of humanity,” 12 (emphasis added).

the meaning of suffering, the ethics of care and compassion, especially toward strangers, the character of the good society, the problem of evil, and so on.<sup>81</sup>

Set beside the depth of such ideas, the self-created, fragile identity concepts that are common in our world today would be revealed to be flimsy, cheap imitations.<sup>82</sup> The necessary traditions of our common humanity include, of course, a robust Christian tradition, and especially a confessional Lutheran anthropology that draws on the uniquely Lutheran theology of the cross.<sup>83</sup> We have not fully appreciated the salutary contributions that a robust Lutheran anthropology would make far beyond the walls of our WELS congregations and missions. Because critical race theory and other critical theories are bound up with questions of deprivation and suffering, placing their hopes in utopian or agonist visions, the infinitely rich resources of our tradition—of the ministry of reconciliation, of the Beatitudes, of the theology of the cross—must be put forward to guide, love, and attract not only our own members but the myriads of people who are alienated in a depersonalizing late modern world.

While this may seem a daunting endeavor, the most urgent task, perhaps, is to focus on the crux of identity: its formation in the earliest years. We have always been strong at the formation of a Lutheran Christian identity, through Lutheran elementary schools, preparatory schools, area Lutheran high schools, a college of ministry, a seminary, Sunday schools, confirmation classes, Lutheran Pioneers, youth retreats, public worship participation, and the like. The alliance among well-formed pastors in the parish, parents in the home, and teachers and staff in the school offers a powerful “greenhouse” for the formation of a Christ-centered person.<sup>84</sup> Given the headwinds created by applications of critical race theory and other deceptive ideas, we must think also of “counter-formation”—

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<sup>81</sup> Hunter, 380.

<sup>82</sup> Weighing in on the ongoing debates about the future of liberal democracy, one political scientist sees the “chief threat to individual freedom in our time” not as “the despotic state, unfettered capital, or traditional norms and an over-regulated economy,” but instead “the imperative, now lodged in most of our institutions and social norms, of perpetual choice and self-creation.” In response, “[l]iberalism must create space for individuals who want to bind themselves to norms, communities, and ways of life that require long-term commitment,” or “pluralistic liberalism.” See John M. Owen IV, “Liberalism’s Fourth Turning,” *First Things* no. 345 (August/September 2024): 40.

<sup>83</sup> Hermann Sasse’s seminal essay, “The Theology of the Cross,” *We Confess Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), Section 1, 36-54, begins by situating the theology of the cross in the context of mid-20th century “illusions” and idols. We would do well to update his critique and make the same applications, beginning with the question Sasse insists must come first: “We in the church should ask how it is with our own repentance. It may be that our call to the world to repent falls on deaf ears because our preaching and our Christianity are perceived as also not free of illusions. The world has a sharp eye for spotting this,” 37.

<sup>84</sup> James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

of accurately and carefully exposing false ideas and presenting the true alternative based on God’s Word.<sup>85</sup> And perhaps no other topic is more crucial or consequential than identity.<sup>86</sup> Extensive research by sociologists Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk has demonstrated that “religion . . . provides a ‘home base’ or ‘grounding’”—a fundamental identity—that “serves, among the vagaries and troubles of life, as a stable reference point by which to navigate life, and a foundation upon which to build a life that need not go ruinously off course or be shaken.”<sup>87</sup>

The world clamors for this kind of formation. Adam Gopnik, staff writer for *The New Yorker*, concludes a 2024 essay on prisons, a topic hotly contested in the literature on critical race theory, with a rare gesture toward hope: “If we are to plant human beings in places where they might blossom again, we need to build better gardens.”<sup>88</sup>

Our churches, homes, and schools, coordinating closely with each other to form each student, offer such gardens. In our time, we must cultivate those gardens of identity formation intentionally and relentlessly.

### **Part three: Going forward**

As we move forward we seek to see the individual as a poor soul ravaged by sin and not as an enemy to be defeated. The church’s mission is to proclaim the gospel to all, even to those who oppose her. Our sinful default position is to attempt to justify our actions and find our value in ourselves. We seek to be right(eous) apart from Christ. This *opinio legis* is not only observed by Scripture and our confessions, but by secular writers as well, most

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<sup>85</sup> The strategy of counter-formation is familiar from the Lutheran Confessions: correct doctrine is addressed to errors. To those errors can be added one’s characteristic of our own time, along lines suggested, for example, by Tim Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), especially pp. 30-37, and in *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2016), especially pp. 126-155. This spirit seems to animate WELS’ project to create a new religion curriculum for youth; see “Theology Curriculum,” WELS Resource Center, <https://cls.welsrc.net/theology-curriculum/>, accessed July 31, 2024. For an exposition of identity as confessional Lutherans understand it, see Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>86</sup> See Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 218-219: “. . . the particular experiences of American religious parents trying to raise their children religiously must be understood . . . within the larger macro-cultural frameworks that profoundly affect them. Understood from that perspective, we see that the cultural and institutional meanings and experiences of religion and family have transformed over the last century, in ways that redefine the place of parents in raising their children. The religious field itself has become socially constituted today as a ‘personal identity accessory,’ rather than the ‘community solidarity project’ it was in the past. . . . Meanwhile, ‘the family’ has morphed from being a community-embedded social institution . . . to a set of individual and *identity lifestyle choices* . . .” (emphasis added).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>88</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Overcorrection: On the abolition of prisons,” *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2024: 63-66.



notably by Jonathan Haidt.<sup>89</sup> This desire for righteousness motivates both the zealous proponent of critical theory and the unthoughtful critic of critical theory. It is tempting to blame society or those in power instead of our own depravity. It is also tempting to dismiss criticisms of our own culture or nation-state instead of fairly analyzing our worldview. This self-justification can also be found in those whose outward display of sympathy is not followed up by any action (e.g., NIMBY<sup>90</sup>). It can also be found in those who dismiss criticisms of our nation-state as simply unpatriotic. Both are seeking the moral high ground for themselves and lose sight of the neighbor along the way. They are attempts at self-justification. This is tragic because (1) We cannot justify ourselves (declare ourselves righteous) apart from Christ, (2) We do not have to because Christ justifies, and (3) We fail to see others who are in the same tragic predicament. It is helpful to understand this about ourselves and the people to whom we minister. “We regard no one from a worldly point of view,” because God has reconciled both us and the world to himself in Christ. He makes his appeal to the world through us: “Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:16,20,21).

Not only is our righteousness found outside of ourselves (*extra nos*), but so is our identity. Just as truth, the reliability of words, and morality itself need a grounding *outside* of human construction, so our true identity as saints is based on the gracious gift of Christ *extra nos*. We want to preach this gracious gift to people rather than simply condemn them for their faulty and tragic attempts at identifying, justifying, and seeking value in incorrect places whether it be inside themselves or within a group.

We also want to preach the good news that they are a part of a story that is not a myth or a political narrative. Humans seek meaning and belonging. We are important and we know it. No mere human story or metanarrative can satisfy our sense of importance that comes from being created in the image of God. Christ shows us our importance and value with his life, death, and resurrection for us. He also honors us by calling us into vocations to carry out good deeds he has prepared in advance (Ephesians 2:10). The true story of Christ gives us the belonging and purpose we all seek. Therefore the highest good is not political dominance, an individual solid work ethic, or even a chaste society. It is the love of God for us and through us.

With this in mind it is helpful to remember the difference between penultimate things and ultimate things. The ultimate thing is the glory of heaven we want for ourselves and every

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<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

<sup>90</sup> “Not In My Backyard”: an epithet for people who offer lip service for construction projects that would benefit the community so long as it doesn’t inconvenience them.

person we meet. Penultimate things are the gifts God gives to us before the ultimate. They include our jobs, our nation-states, the material blessings we enjoy, our political parties, and even our families. There is always the temptation to make the penultimate the ultimate. When we do this we begin to create idols in our hearts. Worshipers of these idols act with religious devotion by claiming orthodoxy for their position and denouncing all critics as heterodox. When we ask penultimate things to act as ultimate, divine things, we have set ourselves up for grave disappointment because these idols cannot save us. Nor can they give us true identity or make us righteous. They cannot even justify our existence. When we trust penultimate things as if they were the ultimate thing, they are no longer gifts given to us for enjoyment and earthly peace but idols which only take from us but never love us like a gracious God.

A proper understanding of God's two kingdoms is essential for navigating a broken world. God's left-hand kingdom and his right-hand kingdom overlap but should not mix. If they mix, the gospel is obscured and often lost. It is difficult but essential for individual Christians and the church to distinguish between what is a cultural or political desire (a penultimate thing) and what is God's will. Mixed messages such as equating American freedom with Christian freedom or equating political justice with biblical justice obscure the gospel.

Critical theory is but one of the most recent human theories that presents challenges to Christians seeking to live faithfully in a fallen world. Without a transcendent orientation, theories typically attempt to compensate for the missing givens, about the nature of truth and how we know it; about language and what language means; and about human identity and accounts of human history. The Christian would do well to remember a few guidelines, drawn from ones we have used in this brief, when taking the measure of any human philosophy or theory:

1. Regarding *truth*, the Bible teaches that we have been created to access at least some truths, such as the natural knowledge of God, the truths revealed in Scripture, and a limited knowledge of the created world around us. This, according to God's Word, is how we know truth—in other words, a biblical epistemology. Believing and functioning as if all truth is subjectively constructed, merely imposed on the world by human beings without an anchor in objective reality, must be deemed contrary to a biblical epistemology.<sup>91</sup> (See Part 1: Differences)
2. Regarding *language*, the Bible teaches that truth can be communicated through meaningful discourse. Because truthful words are reliable, any theories that hold that

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<sup>91</sup> Examples of theories that we must critique, then, are any form of radical postmodernism, relativism, constructivism, postmodern pragmatism (as espoused, e.g., by Richard Rorty), and historical and philosophical Marxism.

language cannot refer to truth but instead assert that language is purely the product of power dynamics related to race, gender, class, and the like, should be regarded as being in conflict with Scripture.<sup>92</sup> (See Part 1: Differences<sup>93</sup>)

3. On *identity* and *history*, the Bible teaches that questions of identity are most fundamentally to be answered in light of God's law and gospel, that is, as sinners and saints, and that the chief narrative for understanding the world is salvation history and the church's mission of reconciliation. While other theories may provide insights into human history, we must critique the reduction of flourishing to merely human understandings of justice or of human beings merely to racial or other human categories. (See Part 2: Justice)

Although some aspects of critical theory seek solutions to legitimate problems, it most certainly involves some premises that must be flatly rejected, such as the denial of objective truth. We cannot be in agreement with points of any philosopher or scholar or writer, whether a proponent of critical theory or any other ideology, if it explicitly, or in its net effect, rejects these principles.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that God chose to curse the people of Babel by confusing language and not with a physical punishment says something very profound about the power of words. We are people of words. God used words to create the universe. We are to interact with each other and seek truth primarily with words. We are to interact with God primarily with words and finally, take him at his word. The Babel confusion of words is arguably the most difficult of all curses to overcome. Linguistic and cultural misunderstandings lead to fear, tribalism, racism, and even war.

Humans seek to understand the words of others to overcome the challenges we face. God, in his grace and mercy, gave us the WORD (λόγος), Jesus, to live among us and to give us the truth. God's truth, the WORD, provides us with clarity in addressing the differences people hear and see in this confused world. Christians have been given Jesus, the Word, the Way, the Truth, and the Life to share with all who have ears to hear. This means that we, Christians, have the most powerful and sole antidote for what ails our world.

For all the confusion of our contemporary world, it is an open marketplace of ideas and this is to our advantage. This is our home turf. This calls for a winsome, truthful, thoughtful, and gracious response from the church and not polemical discourse or defeatist rhetoric. The devil prowls for now but the church remains forever. If we look past the polemical

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<sup>92</sup> The idea that language conveys reality is referred to as logocentrism. The reduction of meaning to power is characteristic, for example, of poststructuralism, deconstructionism, philosophical anti-essentialism, and the work of Michel Foucault.

<sup>93</sup> On power, see above [here](#) (p. 27, last paragraph).

nature of our current discourse, we can see suffering souls who are begging for absolute truth, identity, reconciliation, hope, justification, righteousness, meaning, purpose, and belonging, whether they know it or not. This is what the church has to offer. This is not a time to despair but a thrilling time to be alive. Our reaction to the current culture should be mourning but not rage, hope and not despair. It is time to say and do something grace-filled and profound. This is exactly what Christianity has to offer.

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