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Critical Dilemma (with Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer)

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Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer are the authors of the recently released book, 'Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society': <https://amzn.to/40102v2>. They join me for a discussion of the book and of their concerns about rising ideological movements in churches and other Christian contexts.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by Pat Sawyer and Neil Shenvi, the authors of Critical Dilemma, the Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology, Implications for the Church and Society. Thank you so much for joining me.

Thank you. So, it's certainly apparent that critical theories of various types are making their way into all sorts of fields of academia and all sorts of areas of society. How did you find your way going the other direction into critical theory? It's providential.

So, I am a theoretical chemist by training. I have a PhD in theoretical chemistry from Berkeley. And I wrote about apologetics since becoming a Christian in grad school.

So, my first book was about just basic Christian apologetics. How do we know God exists? How do we know the Bible is reliable? Things like that. But around 2016, I was

finishing the first draft of my book and I met Pat through a mutual friend.

We talked apologetics for hours the first night we met. It was a really fun friendship. But then he told me he was doing a PhD in critical theory, basically, in critical pedagogy and the critical tradition.

And I was noticing at the time a change in our culture. It was around 2015, 2016. Or there's a change in how we talked about race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth.

And when he described his research to me, I realized that he was studying the very ideas I was looking at in even in the church. So, that's how I got involved and began reading a lot of primary sources related to critical theory. And since then, we've been writing and speaking on this topic for eight years now, seven years, long time.

It's been a little bit of time now. Alistair, I was in the banking sector for about 20 years in terms of my work life. And I've been a Christian for about 30 years.

And while I was in my career, God began to press me to get more into the arena of ideas, get more into direct ministry. I considered and prayed about and thought about whether God was leading me to the pastorate or to formal ministry, or if he was leading me to go to secular grad school, get some degrees, and then try to be salt and light in a secular institution. And then through counsel and prayer, I concluded that he was leading me to grad school.

So, I retired from my bank life, and then I took a full-time job that I didn't have to think very much. I went to grad school full-time, and I got a master's in communication studies and then a PhD in educational studies and cultural studies, which is in the critical tradition. And I partly chose that pathway because, number one, I wanted to get into a knowledge area that had some challenge to Christian epistemology.

And so, I could learn about that and then be salt and light in the context of that knowledge area. And then secondly, because there's things in the critical tradition that are concerned about justice issues that do overlap with biblical justice and concerns that I have as a believer. And so, this put me into this pathway, and I wanted to teach.

And so, I got a secular master's and PhD so I could teach in a secular institution. And I'm a faculty member at a state school here in North Carolina. And I began to see some things happening in the church that were concerning to me.

I began to see certain aspects of the church, certain black friends and people of color, contacts and relationships that I had that began to—they were believers, but they began to really think about their primary identity relative to their ethnic identity, relative to their blackness per se. Now, they certainly theoretically said that Christ is my top identity, but it seemed functionally there was a shift in how they were comporting their identity. And then I began to see that in certain ministries, even ministries that claim

some evangelical connection.

I began to see a shift in those ministries from more spiritual concerns to temporal concerns and temporal alleviation, alleviation of oppression. And this concerned me. And obviously, ethnic identity is primary to critical social theory.

And so, I began to see these ideas start to penetrate the church. Neil and I, when we met, he saw some of those things in a more pronounced way than I did. In fact, I was a little bit incredulous at first, but then as we began to talk and I began to think more critically about this, no pun intended, I also started to become alarmed in some ways.

And that led to, as Neil said, us having a connection around this topic and then doing some writing. And Neil's done quite a bit of speaking. I've done a little bit of that.

We've done some writing together. And we were at a conference in New Orleans that was an apologetics conference connected to one of the Southern Baptist seminaries there. This was five or six years ago.

And when we were in the airport leaving, we thought, you know what, we might need to write a book on this topic. It doesn't seem to be going away. And then over the last several years, we kind of hoped maybe that the church would come around and get in a better place relative to some of these topics, but that has not happened.

And so here we are with the book. You both mention a shift that you observed within wider society, but also within the church. And yet the ideas that you're talking about are ideas that have been around in many cases for quite some time in academia.

What do you think are the key things that catalyzed the spread of those ideas within society at large? What has changed? We have in our second chapter, we have a whole long history of our nation's struggle with racism and slavery and Jim Crow and black codes. So that's a larger context for why do we even have, say, a race problem in the US? But of course, that's a century, multi-century long problem. But in the immediate context, I'd say that there were two big events that precipitated a huge shift, seismic shift in how we thought about race, class, and gender.

The first was the rise of Black Lives Matter around 2015. So the murder of Trayvon Martin, and then all the activism surrounding that. Because Black Lives Matter was, people are now realizing, I think, especially an overtly activist, critical theory infused Marxist organization.

I'll say that explicitly, it's not a hidden thing. In our book, we cite some of their statements of beliefs. So they're deeply informed by these critical social theories and anti-racist discourse.

And then more recently, George Floyd's death in 2020, that also created an upsurge in

interest in figures like Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi. I mean, they were sitting back to back bestselling authors on Amazon, on Kindle, on the editor's choice picks for Audible. So those two figures in the popular mind really were at the forefront of quote, unquote, wokeness, whatever you want to call it, critical social theory, critical social justice.

But they were really just channeling ideas that, as you said, have been around in academia for decades. But we're really seeing it entering the mainstream discourse. And it really has been a slow burn.

I'd argue going back to even the 2000s, 2010, you're already seeing books showing up within Christian bookstores, Christian authors, evangelical authors, who are using terms like white fragility, white privilege, whiteness, concepts around gender and sexuality. They're being introduced into the church at a slow rate for decades. And then it really did, I think, reach a breaking point in 2020.

I would also add, Alistair, I completely echo what Neil has said. Another thing in addition to that is the reality of Trump and the reality of the Trump administration and his presidency. Trump is on record saying statements against racism, but he had a hard time winning the mind of the public relative to the issue of racism.

And he's certainly at minimum, no matter where you may sit on the political aisle, he is certainly polarizing. And a number of people in the Black community, Hispanic community, people of color had a problem with his statements and how he carried himself. And while there has been a surge of people in the Black community that are pro-Trump, the media really jumped on his perspectives and amped up and fomented the polarization.

And so that's also contributed to how we have had a resurgence in identity politics in general. And people like Robin DiAngelo are pro-identity politics. They say so plainly, she says so plainly in what she writes and some other people like her.

And to the, in a sense, it was a perfect storm for these ideas to shift from the academy and get downstream into popular culture. One more thing I'd add actually was the Obergefell decision in 2012 that legalized same-sex marriage. And people, people, especially Christians, they think they can separate out race talk and say gender sexuality talk.

But what we saw with Black Lives Matter was that activists who understand these theories, understand they're inseparable within the theory. Like you cannot separate out into separate buckets, race, and then class, and then gender and sexuality. They're all intertwined.

So Black Lives Matter was very overtly explicitly pro-LGBTQ, pro-queer theory, pro-trans, it's on their website. So that, I think it's another one, maybe a third factor that advances

conversation, the growth of transgender ideology and its infusion in society, culture, and education. It seems to me that a lot of the debates that we have surrounding things like critical race theory, whiteness, Marxism, etc.

are focused upon the terms themselves. The terms take on a life of their own as signifiers of where you stand in particular political debates and social divides. And I wonder, is that something in the terms themselves? Is it something of the environment? It seems that there are highly stipulated definitions of things such as whiteness, and those terms will play very differently in different conversations.

In some contexts, it's very clear that this is a form of life that's arisen in a context of white dominance as the majority culture. In other contexts, it's almost attached to the skin of the person themselves. And I wonder, is the ambiguity and the contestability of these terms a feature or a bug for the theories that use them? Oh, it's definitely a feature.

So we have a section on the Motten-Bailey technique. So the Motten-Bailey idea of Motten-Bailey was identified by a philosopher named Nicholas Shackle decades ago, in speaking about postmodern scholarship. So he noted that postmodern scholars will make some outrageous claim like, words have no meaning.

They'll say that. But when you say to them, that's nonsense because you just spoke words, you intended them to have meaning. So how can you say words have no meaning? Then they'll retreat to a more plausible position like, well, I'm just saying that the actual sounds coming out of your mouth don't have an inherent meaning.

That's all I was saying. You'll say, oh, okay. You'll wander away.

And then they'll go back reasserting in words have no meaning. So they have what he described as a Motten-Bailey. So a medieval castle design was the Motten-Bailey.

What you had there was, you had a Bailey was a lower area with the town sort of city center. It was not well fortified, not easily defended. And you'd live there, you'd work there, the peasants would live there.

But when the populace was attacked by an invader, the people would retreat from that Bailey area, the low lying indefensible area, they'd retreat to a Motte, which was a raised sort of castle-like structure that was well defended and defensible. And what Shackle said was, this is the strategy employed by postmodern scholars. They will make some outrageous claim.

The Bailey is a crazy claim. It's obviously false. When you question them, they'll retreat, they'll pull back to the more modest claim, the Motte, and defend that.

But then when you're done attacking, they'll go right back living in the Bailey. So that's

happening a lot with words like whiteness. So you'll hear things like whiteness is wickedness.

And to the most people, the colloquial ear thinks that's horrible racism. Whiteness isn't wickedness any more than blackness is wickedness or Asianness is wickedness. How could you say that? But when you press them, they'll say, well, see, I'm defining whiteness to mean this white power structure that's oppressive and imposes its values and everything.

And that's all, I don't mean people. I just mean this ideology that's actually really harmful. And you're like, okay, you're not talking about people.

And no, no, no, not at all. But then they'll go right back to speaking as if all whites participate in whiteness. So there's equivocation there.

It's very intentional. And there's a lot of language like that where it's used two different ways and people bounce back and forth between these two different definitions. And there are, of course, there also this shibboleth factor where certain words like cultural Marxism or critical race theory, they do take on these weird meanings that even conservatives will use those weaponize those terms and anything that they don't like is critical race theory.

Anything they don't like is cultural Marxism. So it's on both sides will employ that. It's a very standard strategic equivocation on the part of activists.

I think you probably see the same thing with key slogans like defund the police or black lives matter. On the one hand, certainly when it comes to black lives matter, I mean, who could dispute that just at a basic level? But then it's the ways that it's connected to a particular movement connotations that it has in the claims that are being made about what that actually entails. And it's not an innocent phrase that can just be accepted at face value.

And same with defund the police. That's a good example of a Martin Bailey one where on the one hand, people will have this extreme claim of defund the police. And when you investigate it a bit further, it's very clear they don't.

They're not actually saying that, or at least they will say that they're not actually saying that. But clearly, some of them are making more radical claims than the the marked would suggest. One of the things that I would just mention along these lines, Alistair, is that our book takes care into trying to explain terms precisely.

We recognize that, as we've just said, sometimes people on the conservative side of the aisle will try to collapse all kinds of things into a CRT label. And they'll embed things into that CRT label that they're not necessarily connected to CRT. We caution against that.

And then we also recognize that for some on the left, they treat these terms as kind of a shell game, kind of a moving target. Once you identify a problem with a certain term, then sometimes the response will be, oh, I'm not meaning that term. I'm not meaning CRT.

I'm not meaning critical race theory. I'm meaning critical theory. Or I'm not meaning critical theory.

I'm actually meaning critical social justice. And while that can be a weaponized dynamic to actually not deal with the actual ideas behind the label, we recognize that as well. So what our book focuses on is trying to be nuanced and accurate about the actual terms, but then also say, let's not be terribly caught up in terms.

Let's talk about the ideas that are behind the terms. And no matter what you call them, these ideas are problematic. And our book is about addressing those ideas.

One thing I wonder about is the way in which certain movements are moving with certain ideas. They're driven by certain key figures who are the heart of the movement, and they're tied up with certain ideologies. But those movements are standing for the interests of groups, and they're standing for the interests of a particular set of wider concerns than the ideologies that are serving as a vehicle.

And if someone were to say to you, I'm on board with many of the criticisms that you raise about critical race theory, but yet this is the actual vehicle that exists for anti-racism in the current context. And if we were to just throw out all these ideas, we wouldn't have a vehicle to address some of the live issues within our society. Is there a way that we can say, okay, the vehicle of critical race theory has all these sorts of problems, and we're constantly having to address some of these problems.

And it's leaking, it's got structural issues, it's not safe, etc. But at the same time, it's what we have, and we have to work with it. Is there a way to criticize the movement while not evacuating the energy from the actual anti-racist movement within society? I was going to say that I think the metaphor of a vehicle is useful because vehicles are driving in one direction, they're heading somewhere.

So you just say, well, I realize the vehicle has problems, but at least it's the only vehicle we have. And say, okay, but where is it pointing? And what you find is, for example, Black Lives Matter, the organization versus the movement say, well, the movement has coalesced around the organization and has embraced the organization's end goals and ideology and assumption and presuppositions. And all of those end goals are pointing in a direction that is antithetical to Christianity.

It just is. And you can read their statement of beliefs. So I sympathize with Christians who say, all we want to do is to fight racism, actual racism.

We get that Black Lives Matter has all of these terrible ideas, but what else are we going to do? And I would sympathize, but I'd say, but you can't get on board with that. On the right, there are other, there are plenty of groups on the right that are trying to build power and get popularity that have tons of terrible ideas associated with them. But we rightly say that Christians, we get that you support some of their goals, but they're heading in the wrong direction.

You can't get on board with them as a Christian. And I would be fully behind. There are actually groups that we support that we appreciate Dr. George Yancy, who we quote extensively, he's a Black evangelical sociologist at Baylor, who's doing work on collaborative conversations and racial dialogue.

Monique Dusson and Krista Bontrager at the Center for Biblical Unity, who have a curricula on racial unity within the church to both evangelical Christians. So if you look for them, there are people out there, organizations out there that are trying to address these same issues from a biblical perspective. So I would find those, but I do not think we can compromise our core convictions for the sake of political power and expediency.

I would also mention that at what cost, if we choose the pathway of a deficient solution and one that is strongly diseased and problematic, what are the other byproducts of that that will be deleterious to our society? Some of our endorsers have come to this issue because they've seen a critical social theory approach to racist issues to yield more problems than it solves. And so that is another feature that has to be thought about in terms of if we were to choose that pathway. And then also, as Neil has alluded to, we make the point that there are better biblical solutions and biblical answers and Christian answers to these societal problems, and that we don't need critical race theory to address these issues because Christian epistemology addresses all these issues and how to think rightly about these issues.

And then I think it's critical that we also recognize that while someone could pick their spots with a certain critical social theory and try to emphasize something that it gets right, and we actually acknowledge where critical social theory gets certain things right, while that can be done in a specialized way or in a narrow way, if we're going to try to offer a robust answer and solution to the social problems that we see, then we have got to take on the entire beliefs and perspectives and presuppositions and internal commitments that these knowledge areas have, and then we have to work in keeping with the rules and regulations, essentially, of those knowledge areas, how to think about power, for instance, how to think about addressing the social ills that are before us. And when we do that, now we run strongly afoul of biblical Christianity, and we will not be able to actually implement critical social theory in a robust way if we're going to stay committed to biblical epistemology. When you talk about the Martin Bailey maneuver and other things like that, it seems to me some of these things are occurring on a movement level as well.

So you have a lot of people on the ground who are supporting these movements who are very much within the the mot. They're not holding the really extreme claims. They are holding something that's a lot more focused, a lot more of a modest claim, but then there are key leaders who are using the political capital gained from those who are supporting the movement to support these far more radical claims.

And I have a lot of friends who would, on the one hand, say, okay, we see these problems with certain key leaders, the ideologies that they're holding, they're advancing. But when I was marching with this, that was not what it was about for me. It was about addressing this specific injustice and saying that we need to reform the police or certain measures need to be taken.

And some of those measures which have been taken, we can see as positive. It's positive that there is a lot more ability to hold police accountable for injustices in the legal system than there was a few years back, or that there are cameras now that will capture certain of these disputed situations. But on the other hand, the way in which that political capital has been used, I think, is increasingly people are realizing this is not actually what we are marching for, what these leaders are doing with our political capital.

There's a sense of, there's a grift here with Ibram Kendi's movement over the last few months, the way that that's really collapsed. And then also with recent, last few days, even seeing the ways in which really extreme claims that are extreme, in the sense of, to the point of genocidal, those sorts of claims are being advanced using the ideology and the theories that were purported to making these far more modest political movements. And so it seems to me that maybe analysis of these movements in terms of Martin Bailey, in terms of their base and the leaders and what they're doing with that political capital can sometimes be in order.

Of course, there are extremists in the base too. I do think that's a good point, that most people live in the Mott, so to speak, in the defensible claim, the claim that's easier to defend. But there are people in the Bailey still continuing to make those extreme claims.

And then they're also getting all the attention. And when the media amplifies those voices, then we start to see a shift, so to speak, a paradigm shift in culture in keeping with movement towards those more extreme claims. So that is a good way to think about it.

Yeah, I would actually add that we have to remember there's intercourse between the Mott and the Bailey. So yeah, the average Christian say three years ago, you say, are you anti-racist? They'd say, yeah, of course, we're pro-racist. Of course, I'm anti-racist.

We're all anti-racist. But then there are the actual anti-racist leaders like D'Angelo and Kendi who are saying, and Black Lives Matter organization and all these other scholars

who we quote extensively in our book, who define anti-racism, say, to include total acceptance of LGBTQ transgenders, all that stuff. They will say, Kendi says outright, you cannot be homophobic and be anti-racist.

You cannot be homo-transphobic. You have to embrace feminism, anti-class, anti-capitalist policies to be anti-racist. So the problem is that at first, the Christian is saying, well, yeah, I'm anti-racist.

Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be? But then over the course of months and years, they are slowly sucked in the whole way of thinking. So now they begin in the Mott maybe, but they're actually taking vacations to the Bailey more and more and more, and eventually find themselves there.

And we've seen that with a number of figures in the evangelical church where they began really in a pretty biblical place. But in, say, five years, they've gone radically to the left and even apostatized. One area I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on, you talk about the way that these ideas have made their way into broader culture and into the church.

It seems to me that the role played by social media and the rise of the internet really is crucial. Catherine Dee has spoken about the way that Tumblr and other online contexts have served as agents of radicalization. And part of this is a sort of identity politics that arises in the context where we're constantly constructing representations of our identity online and trying to relate to other people through those representations and finding common signifiers around which we can gather, which are provided by the ideologies.

And it seems to me beyond that, we also have a certain movement within corporations. When you see a progress flag, for instance, it's very clearly, this is not something that you're seeing in your local barber for the most part or in the local butcher. This is something that tends to be associated with big international corporations.

And there is a certain, to use some critical theory against these things, it does seem that there are vested economic interests within these things that are not on the surface. What we're seeing on the surface with all the emphasis upon this bringing together of all these marginalized groups can actually serve the interests of those who would be their patrons and upon whom they can become dependent. And it seems also that there is, within this, there's a movement to a sort of projection of one's inabilities and problems and tensions into the realm of ideology.

There are two really good pieces that I read a while in the last year, articles that discuss this in various ways. One of them is failure to cope under capitalism by Claire Coffey. And the other is Orna Guralnik, I'm a couples therapist, something new is happening in relationships in the New York Times Magazine.

Both of them talking about the way that people, when they're experiencing struggles that are of personal nature, they're struggling to live as adults, to get by, to make a living, to manage tensions within their relationships or families. They will increasingly project that into the realm of ideology and it becomes metabolized in the categories provided by these critical theories. And so it seems to me that without some sense of the role played by social media and the new relationship within which we stand to these ideologies and to each other within that realm, it's difficult to understand exactly how they've captured so much social power and interest.

There's a lot there. I do think we have to try to understand why these ideas are so attractive to people today. Because on the surface, a lot of conservatives look from the outside and say, you know, you're all at each other's throats all the time, you're canceling each other, you can't speak, you're always being shut down or silenced by someone with more oppression score than you, a higher oppression score than you.

How can you, why was it attractive? But I think you're right that so we have to understand people's motivations. So actually in chapter 13, I think we have a list of the spiritual, moral, psychological, sociological factors that drive people in the arms of critical social theory. And I think you can name some of them right there.

I would agree that critical theory, we approach these ideas in terms of, we can think about them rightfully as a kind of worldview, a way of dealing with what's our biggest problem in life, what's the solution. And the difference between say Christianity and this contemporary critical theory worldview, one of them revolves around what's your main problem. And for Christianity, the main problem is that we're sinners in the face of the Holy God that we stand condemned by our sin.

And that the solution then is to throw yourself on God's mercy in Christ. But for the critical social theory theorist, the problem is external to you. It's people are oppressing you.

You're part of these systems outside of you that you can't control. So rather than looking for a solution from God's mercy, you look for a solution through politics. And it's appealing because you can cast yourself as a victim of these forces rather than a perpetrator.

And I don't want to get too much into the victimology stuff, but it is true that human beings forget whether the victimology thing, we're always looking for fig leaves. We're trying to cover up our shame and guilt. And I think the critical social theory merely provides one very effective and popular fig leaf to blame all of our sin and moral failings on the system rather than having to repent and say, actually, the problem is me to quote Gen Z Taylor Swift, right? I'm the problem, it's me.

We're being called to do that as Christians. And again, I'm not denying that there is

oppression or actual injustice. I'm saying that if you short circuit repentance, you've an easy way to feel better than other people and to feel like you're on the right side of history.

You're clean, you're good. You're not one of those bigots. That's definitely a motivation for adopting these theories.

I would mention also Alistair, in relation to what you're saying about social media, the explosion of social media has really put the common person out there for everybody to see. And that has accentuated the dynamics that we're talking about here in terms of how people are beginning to imbibe these ideas and represent these ideas. It's not that people are going out and teenagers are not going out to read Michelle Foucault and Judith Butler to get their ideas around gender and power.

But TikTok will offer you plenty of content. I teach in a state university, and my undergrads are eat up with social media. They can't even begin to unplug.

And sometimes we do a debrief. I'll bring up certain cultural issues and I'll ask, who's got an opinion around these issues? And where are you learning your information around these issues? It is social media. It's what they're getting from certain influencers and certain content.

And every now and then, we'll get in some very interesting conversations about, well, does this particular influencer actually know what they're talking about? And how would you know? And how are you determining that? But without question, like you mentioned, in the advent of social media over the last decade, and how it is captivating our time, and particularly the time of the younger generation, so to speak, that are really beginning to imbibe woke ideology, which is downstream from critical social theory. This is coming through social media-created formats. And it's an interesting question to consider.

How can this be slowed down? How can cultural patterns that now seemingly are getting entrenched, that are fairly new, but they are getting entrenched, how will people really de-plug, so to speak, and unplug, decouple themselves from their mediated devices and the influencers that so many are looking up to? That's a difficult question to tackle. Neil, you mentioned victimhood earlier. And I think this is an important part of the conversation.

One of the theorists of victimhood over the last 100 years, very famous for his discussion of the scapegoat mechanism, and the way that Christianity exposed victimhood mechanisms, is René Girard. And he writes in his discussion of new movements around victimhood, the way that there is a current process of spiritual demagoguery and rhetorical overkill that has transformed the concern for victims into a totalitarian command and a permanent inquisition. The media themselves notice this and make fun

of victimology, which doesn't keep them from exploiting it.

This was quite some time ago, when he wrote this. The fact that our world has become solidly anti-Christian, at least among its elites, does not prevent the concern for victims from flourishing. Just the opposite.

The majestic inauguration of the post-Christian era is a joke. We are living through a caricatural ultra-Christianity that tries to escape from the Judeo-Christian orbit by radicalizing the concern for victims in an anti-Christian manner. And he goes on to say, the attempt by Nietzsche and Hitler to make humankind forget the concern for victims has ended in a failure that seems definitive, at least for the moment.

But it is not Christianity that profits from the victory of the concern for victims in our world. It is rather what I think must be called the other totalitarianism, the most cunning and malicious of the two, the one with the greatest future by all evidence. At present, it does not oppose Judeo-Christian aspirations, but claims them as its own and certainly moved beyond that state and questions the concern for victims on the part of Christians, not without a certain semblance of reason at the level of concrete action, given the deficiencies of historical Christianity.

The other totalitarianism does not openly oppose Christianity, but outflanks it on its left wing. All through the 20th century, the most powerful mimetic force was never Nazism and related ideologies, or those that openly opposed the concern for victims and that readily acknowledged its Judeo-Christian origin. The most powerful anti-Christian movement is the one that takes over and radicalizes the concern for victims in order to paganize it.

The powers and principalities want to be revolutionary now and they reproach Christianity for not defending victims with enough ardour. In Christian history, they see nothing but persecutions, acts of oppression, inquisitions. It seems to me that Gérard's discussion of this was really very prescient and he's speaking to developments that we've seen really take fuller form in the last few decades.

What is there about the present understanding of victimhood within these movements that differs from the Christian understanding and how can the Christian understanding respond to these without denying the category of victim and actually upholding what it has done historically to sensitize us to the figure of the victim? So I think Gérard nails it. It is very prescient. I think the key to understanding how critical theory reinterprets victimhood is understanding how they reinterpret the word oppression.

So they will outright say plainly that oppression used to mean tyranny, unjust, cruel treatment, control, murder, theft, things like that, rape. This is how oppression operates. But they would say they redefined, reconceptualized the term oppression to refer not just to those overt acts but to refer to the subtle ways in which the ruling class, whether

it was whites, men, heterosexuals, Christians, imperialists, the able-bodied, whenever you had a ruling class that imposed their values and norms on culture, that was oppression.

This is how you get the idea today that is very common that anyone who is a minoritized group is oppressed by these norms. So for example, the gender binary, queer theory would say, is itself oppressive. It is a heterosexual construct that a bunch of straight white men imposed on society and therefore anyone who is outside of the gender binary in their own experience at least, that they are oppressed.

It is how you get the idea that a radical feminist idea that would say that we live in a patriarchy that imposed patriarchal values on culture and therefore women are oppressed even by claiming there are any differences between male and female. That is an oppressive idea and that there should be complete gender equality, sex equality across the board. So all of these critical social theories have redefined the word oppression and therefore are skeptical of all norms and all values.

They see all of these norms and values as mere expressions of power and arbitrary conventions of the ruling class as a way to justify their own power and privilege. Well, right off the bat, we have a problem because absolutely some norms and values are mere social constructs. They are indeed created to benefit the ruling class.

That's obviously like Jim Crow. There's the social structure of Jim Crow and the deference that people of color had to pay the whites was taken for granted as normal and neutral and rational even God ordained and yet we know now like in retrospect, no, it's totally unbiblical. But we have to affirm as Christians that there are indeed a set of norms and values that are objective because they are God's norms and values.

So we can't just right off the bat say that any kind of norms or values are necessarily oppressive. They should be treated with skepticism and cynicism because God's given us a set of and written into our hearts and written into nature norms and values that are his and that are good and just. So a simple example would be the gender binary is not oppressive.

It is a fact of nature. It is a feature of reality and to uphold the gender binary is to live in light of God's creation. So that wraps up the problem is that we have because we've even unconsciously redefined the word oppression, we now have classes of people who can claim to be victims, but they're actually victims of what? Well, of reality as in a sense, they're victims of living in God's universe.

And then we're finding ourselves fighting against God's reality and against God's rules and norms and values. So we have to identify that first step in redefining oppression, which then redefines what victimhood means. And we just go back and say, no, no, we have to hold ourselves to God's authority and God's standard.

And of course, we can have compassion, everyone can love everyone. We can't label you a victim because you're rebelling against God. You're not a victim for that.

You're actually an offender. And then we also see the reality of totalitarianism connected to victimhood power. Today, if someone's triggered in any way, if someone's dealing with trauma in any way, everybody stops.

Everybody makes sure that that person or that group is catered to. And that is power. And we also see that the intersectional identity markers that put someone in an oppressed status relative to gender and sexuality and race and class, if you meet certain identity markers that put you in an oppressed category, well, now, critical social theory would say that you have special insight relative to social analysis about the vector that you're in.

If you're gay, then you have special insight into how to think about gay concerns and gay issues and how society ought to treat and think about the LGBTQIA plus community. And so there's a social power and a cultural capital that comes with that victimhood status connected to those oppressed intersectional identities. And you see that power being manifested in various local hegemonic situations.

For instance, you can be in certain parts of the secular academy. And if you are an older white Christian male, conservative politically, well, you're not someone that is in the place of power in that context. You're actually not part of the prevailing hegemonic dominant status quo that is dictating terms in that context.

And so there's a power that comes with these intersectional categories that are slated towards oppression and victimhood. And there's a totalitarian element to that. And that is getting more and more pronounced in the context of businesses, in the context of educational spaces and institutions, in the context of civic dynamics within a certain community or city.

We see those people that are part of those groups that are connected to victimhood. Now they are in a position of power in terms of dictating terms in those environments. And that, so what you read was quite prescient, no doubt.

In fact, that was the word I was thinking about before you finished. And in fact, before we get out of here, I'd love for you to send us a link to that article, in fact. I wonder also whether this understanding of victimhood leads to a sort of abdication of the responsibilities that come with moral agency.

If you are a victim, then what you do is determined by the parties that have acted upon you. And I think we've seen this in the last few days with the situation in Israel, that we can talk about all the injustices that genuinely exist in Gaza. But the idea that Hamas has been justified in extreme acts of violence against civilians and targeting civilians is

seen to follow for many from the fact that they are victims.

Or at the very least, the fact that they have acted against victims is not something for which they are responsible. They are acting purely out of the fact that they have been victimized. And it seems to me that more generally, as this victimhood ideology starts to produce people who are exercising power, that leads to a denial of the responsibility that comes with power.

Because people who are exercising power, who see themselves as victims, can be justified in their exercise of extravagant and unjustified force against those who are portrayed as their victimizers. And yet they are not responsible for their moral agency. And so power becomes unaccountable in a situation where it's so tethered to this ideology of victimhood.

So I'll say two things. First is that in Robin DiAngelo and Osama bin Laden's book, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* There's a figure 5.1 in their book. And it has a list of various oppressions, racism, sexism, classism, transgender, transphobia, and so forth.

And they have a list of different groups. So there are the dominant groups, whites, men, heterosexuals, Christians, and there's a list of the subordinate groups, women, people of color, LGBTQ people. They have two columns.

The synonym they have for dominant group, sorry, the synonym they have for oppressed group or subordinate group is the target group. They're targeted by these oppressions, right? They label the other column of oppressors or dominant groups. The other synonym they use is the agent group.

They're the group with agency. The other group is merely a target of their agency. So exactly what you're saying is explicitly brought out.

These groups lack agency. And even in some sense, moral agency, they are forced into whatever they're doing, whatever they do, it's not really their fault because they're the victim of oppression. And remember, oppression doesn't refer to actual overt acts of injustice.

They're oppressed because there's a gender binary. They're oppressed by living in a white supremacist society or living in a patriarchy. And so ironically, a lot of conservative women, a lot of conservative Blacks will actually, they detest this notion that they have no agency because it really is dehumanizing.

And as Christians, we also know that we have moral agency, whether we want it or not. You cannot pass the buck. This is what Adam and Eve did in the garden.

It wasn't my fault. It's a serpent. It wasn't my fault.

It was a woman that you put here. So we see this tendency to abdicate and say, we wash our hands. We have no, we were made to do it.

And that is deeply wrong. And that's why I'd say that first of all, as Christians, we have to reject the idea that anybody is not accountable as a moral agent merely because of their social location. Every one of us will stand before God and again, give an account.

Number two, they want to say, what we're articulating right now would be extremely offensive and triggering to people that have been by critical social justice because they believe one of their core ideas is that the ruling class, whether it's whites or men or heterosexuals or Christians, they will come up with excuses that justify their power. So this whole discourse on moral agency and moral accountability that we're having, they will say, there you go. This is exactly how white people and how men and how Christians and how they claim to be appealing to the Bible and talking about how well, the Bible says we're all moral agents.

That's their excuse for ignoring the reality of injustice and how they're depriving us of our agency. So it's really insidious because even the discussion of, Hey, wait a minute. The Bible does actually hold us all accountable.

Doesn't it? We'll say you would say that because you're a straight white male Christian. There's no getting out of that. You've cut off all accountability, even from the Bible, because all of it will be seen as this power play to justify our dominance.

On that front. One thing that really struck me recently was going around the gift store in the civil rights museum in Birmingham, Alabama. The civil rights museum is a place people must visit.

It's an amazing display of the history of the civil rights movement, but there is a striking and jarring disconnect between the earlier movement of civil rights, which sought to accentuate and foreground black responsible moral agency and the ability of. Particularly black male leaders who were presenting themselves as moral agents over against forces that were not self controlled and were striking out at them and in the process, discrediting themselves as those who claim to be exercising authority in society. And that shift from that symbolic emphasis upon black agency, responsibility, um, power, um, exercise through this accentuation of.

The abilities of the community and training in actual control of themselves and acting in a coordinate coordinated fashion to a vision that's focused upon the black trans woman. And that was very much seen in the gift store where that sort of figure, where it was a figure of abjection of extreme victimhood and not responsibility, but claim against those who are agencies, the agents who are the ones targeting. It seems that there has been a shift within the movement against racism that has entailed this emphasis upon victimhood rather than the recognition.

There has been extreme injustice. And in the face of that extreme injustice, we must assert our agency and we must recover the agency that has been denied to us as, um, human beings made in the image of God. And we must also expose the way that those who are exercising oppressive power against us actually do not have true agency.

They're acting out of impulse and instinct. They're acting out of unconsidered ideology. They are not actually responsible moral agents themselves.

And so recovering that moral agency became a means of exposing something that was lacking in the oppressor party. They're not pure agents either. And it seems to me that there's been a very radical shift that that can be seen in the symbolic movement from the, the black responsibility in self-controlled process protests and resistance in a peaceful manner of extreme violence to violent breaking out in the name of particularly the black trans woman.

Yeah, I think you're certainly onto something there. I would also take it a little bit further. It's not just that one is not now morally responsible, but one is morally justified in a sense with this response because of the, the past issues that have taken place.

And also relative to how we've shifted, how we're thinking about oppression and thinking how we're thinking about white supremacy, for instance. We mentioned that term, you know, white supremacy historically being tied to white power and white nationalist groups. And obviously the civil rights movement was pushing back against the hardcore white nationalists and white power groups and that hardcore racism.

Well, now that term white supremacy has been changed. It's been expanded and it's been diluted and it's been tethered to white majoritarianism and been tethered to norms and traditions and customs that now are ostensibly oppressive, even though they're not tyrannical or this violent, overt oppression. So we had to change the definition of this oppression.

So then now we can onboard more perspective in terms of how we're going to deal with what now we're classifying as racist actions. And this means there has to be a shift. And so critical social theory pushes back against classical liberalism.

Critical social theory pushes back against the civil rights movement in certain ways. And you're right. This is a shift.

Now, obviously there's still people that are part of the black community that are holding on to historic civil rights perspective, you know, no doubt. But woke ideology downstream from critical social theory now is about an aggressive identity politics that has altered how we're thinking about oppression and victimhood. So now, whereas Martin Luther King Jr. would be pro, for instance, traditional marriage and before marriage between a man, one man and one woman.

Well, now that's considered to be an oppressive, you know, heteronormative perspective. And so when we alter how we're thinking about oppression, now we have to alter how we fight against it. And we're going to have to, if we're taking the approach of critical social theory in a real sense, we're going to have to discard the methods connected to the historic civil rights movement and the classical liberalism, because now we're dealing with a different species of a thing.

And those methods now are not applicable. There has seemed to be, and we've discussed this in various ways at points in this conversation, a sort of coalition of the margins that has developed around critical theories, where you have an assembly of different positions, I think, particularly in the LGBTQ, etc. group, there's been a bringing together of many different interest groups within minority and marginalized categories.

And there's a coalescence of all of their interests, and an emphasis upon all standing together. And so you can't support one movement without supporting them all. To what extent is that baked into the theories? To what extent is it a matter of political practice that could be abandoned without thoroughly jettisoning the theories? It is absolutely explicitly baked into the theories.

So my favorite reference for critical race theory, for example, is *Words That Wound*. It's an anthology published in 1993, co-edited by Kimberly Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Charles Lawrence. These are four co-founders of critical race theory, writing four years after its first official founding.

And they have six core defining elements, they call them, of critical race theory. And number six says that critical race theory views racism, sexism, and heterosexism as these interlocking systems of oppression, and that critical race theory is part of this broader movement to liberate all people and to tear down all social hierarchies through, in their words, quote, massive social transformation, end quote. So you can read that, and it's throughout the literature.

It goes from 1989 to 2023. It's fused literature. So this idea, this very naive idea, which unfortunately has become prominent among some evangelicals, that we can only apply critical race theory to race.

It's never been only about race, going back as long as you want. And actually Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to insist that it's not only about race. So her idea was that, you know, your identities are complex, you can't be limited or shrunk down into a single factor like race or gender or class.

You're a combination of all those factors. So a Black woman experiences double oppression on the basis of her gender and her race, whereas a white woman only experiences, say, gender prejudice. So the bottom line is that that theory of intersectionality really took off, and it basically united all of these different critical social

theories under a single overarching framework.

And so now you will read critical race theory textbooks, and they'll have a whole chapter on queer theory or on, you know, queer theory ideas. You'll read queer theory texts, and they'll have sections on race. You could read disability texts, and they'll have sections on race and gender.

So within that framework, you cannot pull these struggles apart. It's not merely a political alliance. It is baked in the deepest level of theories, and has been for decades.

So again, I find that just so frustrating that Christians don't see that, because if you read the primary sources, it's over and over and over stated. And to continue that, it's also stated that not only can you not disentangle these intersectional identities and the oppressions that go with them, but that if you attempt to do that, you're not actually doing critical race theory. You're not actually doing anti-racism.

You know, the scholars are very explicit that if you are not going to adopt, let's say, the agenda of the LGBT plus community, then you're not going to be someone who is actually anti-racist, pushing back against racism. And we recognize that certainly an issue of racism for a Black woman is different than for a Black man, because her gender is connected to how that racism might be manifested. We don't deny that there's some common sense perspective there, and we actually honor that.

But the actual move to then say that you can't meaningfully fight against racism without adopting the LGBTQ plus community's agenda and perspective is just made up. That's just not true. You absolutely can.

And that's partly because we are understanding how power is being manifested in society, and not everything that is being labeled as oppression is actually oppression. And so we can deal with actual oppression when it is in front of us, and then also recognize that what's being called oppression over here is not actually oppression. And so since I'm not dealing with that, that doesn't mean I'm disingenuous or not being effective in dealing with the actual oppression.

And I would want to mention too, Alistair, that part of that pushback on the civil rights movement that we were talking about earlier, it's because issues around egalitarianism, equality, objectivity, neutrality, colorblind perspective that was heralded in certain ways relative to the civil rights community, these perspectives now are considered by critical social theory as ideas that actually mask racism, that cover up actual racism. And while there's some nuance here and some truth to get at in terms of unpacking that on some level, a blanket statement in that regard is ultimately false. But critical social theory, again, has had to change how it fights against perceived oppression, because again, oppression has been changed in terms of how it's defined.

One thing I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on is the way in which Christians have had different responses to these critical theories. So there have been some who have tried to develop a more Christian approach to critical theory, taking on board some of the tools provided by critical theory, while also being very aware of some of the faults and the tendencies that you have identified. So think of something like Christopher Watkins' recent book, *Biblical Critical Theory, How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*.

On the other hand, there have been those who have had a sort of counter movement to critical theory, where there's an emphasis upon bringing together a different sort of identitarianism that is very much opposed to the coalition of race, gender, sexuality, etc., but along lines that follow very similar underlying dynamics. And I'll be curious to hear your thoughts on how Christians can relate to these various approaches that have been taken relative to critical theories within their own churches. So I think we reject the eat the meat, spit out the bones approach to critical social theory, because our contention is that it's not meat and bones, it's poisoned meat.

You can't get the poison out of the meat, it's poison, it's the whole point of the poison. So what we would say is instead what you can do is you can affirm true statements that are made by critical theorists. If they're actually true, all truth is God's truth.

If it's actually true, it's actually true. And you can say, the critical theorist said this, but it's actually rooted in reality, which God created. So we can affirm that without saying that critical theory itself is true.

I analogy would be if an atheist car mechanic tells you your muffler's broken, you don't have to deny that because he's an atheist. You can say, oh, yes, my muffler is indeed broken, even though you're an atheist. Does not mean you're affirming atheism.

So in the same way, we go through our whole chapter seven is about positive insights from critical social theorists. We say there are all these things they say that are actually true and reasonable. Now, but we have to be careful, does not mean we're advocating that critical theory is a good way to think about reality.

It's not remotely. I would just try to do that. I've learned actually even to use language.

I don't say critical race theory has positive insights. I was assuming like critical race theorists occasionally have positive insights to make sure it's very clear to people what I'm affirming. I also wonder in many of these movements, it seems that there are deeper spiritual issues around guilt that are at play.

And as Christians, we have very clearly an account of what sin is, an account of what guilt is, and an account of how to deal with these things. How can Christians speak to the reality of guilt, whether so-called communal guilt or individual guilt of things like

complicity of things like truth telling about past sins and crimes? How do we relate to these things as Christians trying to speak from a Christian vantage point? Yeah, that's an important question, Alistair. In our book, we have a section that gets into collective guilt and how to think about collective guilt and to think about sin and guilt in general.

And we make it clear that you're not guilty of any sins that you did not commit. You're not guilty of sins that you did not commit. And even when we see what's happening in terms of repentance on behalf of Israel by certain prophets in the Old Testament, what we're seeing there is those prophets themselves are including themselves in the we, in the us, recognizing their own sin and complicity in what's being discussed.

And so we go through chapter and verse on how to think about guilt and sin. And while we are strong that, again, you're only guilty of sins that you have actually committed, this doesn't mean that you can't think about, say, the issue of reparations and whether a country like the United States, for most of its existence, has some strong oppression relative to slavery and Jim Crow for a certain group, a certain constituency. It's not unreasonable for that country to think about how it might redress ongoing related implications from that oppression to the group that is in existence today.

It's not improper to think about, but we can't tie that to false views of hermetology, false views of sin and guilt. We just cannot do that. And then also we see that sometimes people will conflate restitution with reparations.

And restitution, biblically, is if I defraud someone of something that I need to pay them back, because I did it in real time. When we think of, for instance, the account with Zacchaeus. But that has nothing to do with something that I might do now that has to do with an offense that took place with someone else 150 years ago.

So we're talking about two things that are mutually exclusive from each other, and we have to be careful not to conflate those things. We also would say that if there are institutions that historically have been very sinful in terms of how they have acted in certain capacities, like the Southern Baptist Convention, for instance, it is entirely proper for the group now of the Southern Baptist Convention and those leaders to say, hey, historically, we did x, y, z, and that was egregious and wrong. And our organization laments that, and we are not going to be about that going forward.

I think, Neil and I think strongly that those things are important to do those things without question. On that front, in conclusion, it seems that many of these issues come down not to pure objective facts and realities in society, and they don't come down either to purely subjective things. There's something intersubjective about what we're dealing with.

And it's the relations between parties within society and the need for things from each other, the need for dignity, meaning, purpose, belonging, some sort of face within

society, the need for freedom from a sense of being burdened by stigma, the need for a story, the need for recognition and agency and honor and a place. And as Christians, often, if we're framing these things in terms of guilt, and other categories like that, we might find we're limited in what we can say. And you've already spoken to some of these things, but in talking about the categories that we have that might be more effective and Christian in speaking to some of these concerns than the ones that are typically used.

What are some of the ways that within churches, where there are divisions over these issues, that there can be a greater hospitality and concern and love for those who are sensitized to their lack of standing within society, to their marginal status, whatever it is, without resorting to the categories that are given to us by the critical theories that you discuss? I'll just say something quickly, then Neil, you can follow up. We agree strongly that those that have been part of majoritarian society, those who have had power and cultural capital in society, need to be sensitive and think about those groups that have been minoritized, and have had deficits in cultural capital and cultural power. And so that will mean that Christians will need to be thinking about how their brothers and sisters of color, and brothers and sisters that have been connected to groups that have had deficiencies in power in the course of the history of the United States and the context that they're in, then there should be some sensitivity about that.

And there is a need to be a promotion of racial harmony and connection and unity. Now, when there's been sin committed between the two groups, if there's been a white person who sinned against a black person in a racist way, well then obviously they need to repent over that sin, of course. But when that has not happened in time and space, there still needs to be some kind of sensitivity, understanding the context that we're in.

And so we lay out in our book a plan, a three-point plan of awareness, and then contemplation, and then action when it comes to racism in this country. And we are calling on people that have been part, whites particularly, of the white majoritarian culture in the United States, who have not had the press of racism against them, even remotely, like their black and brown brothers and sisters of color. We encourage them to get aware of what has happened in terms of our racialized history and the implications of that for today in terms of lack of resources or lack of agency or lack of opportunity that still linger.

And then when we gain that kind of awareness, then we contemplate it, think about it, and think about ways that we can start to take action to be a force, to be salt and light, to be a stakeholder in society that is pushing back against racism and opening up doors of agency and upper mobility and opportunity where we can for our brothers and sisters of color who have had deficits. I'll say two things. One is that we emphasize the need for dialogue in the church.

I find that when I talk to people who are even skeptical of, you know, our whole approach

to these issues, when I'm willing to talk to them, listen to them, and listen to their concerns, and then share my concerns, that's very effective. People want to know that you care, that you're listening to them. And then I think that's the way forward for the church as a whole.

We have to stand against these theories. They're terrible. And yet we have to do that, I think, by winning people's hearts, creating unity in the church, not further division.

That's number one. And number two is just preach the gospel. It sounds so simple, but the gospel is what unites us as Christians.

All of this is founded on the fact that Jesus purchased for himself a people to be the family of God, to be a new nation, a holy people. And so when we see that, when we see what Christ has done for us, then that will begin to make all these other issues not non-existent, but less important in light of what we share in Christ. So I think, again, the dialogue and then the unity in Christ has to be forefront of how we preach the gospel.

The book is *Critical Dilemma, the Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology, Implications for the Church and Society*. Neil and Pat, thank you so much for joining me. Thank you very much.

Absolutely. Thank you.