Our Citizenship is in Heaven: Christ's Church and Cultural Pressures
SG Pastors Conference Breakout Session
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Three sources of cultural pressure: critical theories, political idolatries, and the modern self.

1. Critical Theories

Definition: critical theories interpret society in categories of power and oppression (or exclusion and inclusion), and seek to dismantle structural imbalances.

Examples:

Most of the following examples can be explored in Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's book, *Cynical Theories*.[1] I have provided quotes in the appendix that give more detail to some of these theories, drawn from a much wider range of primary sources. My point here is merely to note the wide spectrum of theories and academic disciplines that share a similar conceptual DNA as forms of critical theory.

- Feminist theory
- Queer theory
- Gender theory
- Trans theory
- Critical race theory
- Fat theory

To use one example that blends multiple critical theories, consider this introduction to a new book from Eerdman's:

> "Angela Parker wasn't just trained to be a biblical scholar; she was trained to be a *White male* biblical scholar. She is neither White nor male. Dr. Parker's experience of being taught to forsake her embodied identity in order to contort herself into the stifling construct of Whiteness is common among American Christians, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. This book calls the power structure behind this experience what it is: White supremacist authoritarianism.
>
> "Drawing from her perspective as a Womanist New Testament scholar, Dr. Parker describes how she learned to deconstruct one of White Christianity's most pernicious lies: the conflation of biblical authority with the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility. As Dr. Parker shows, these doctrines are less about the text of the Bible itself and more

[1] Helen Pluckrose and James A. Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).

about the arbiters of its interpretation—historically, White males in positions of power who have used Scripture to justify control over marginalized groups."[2]

There is a complicated intellectual background to these theories. See some of the resources in the appendix if you want to trace this further. But two primary points are relevant to us here:

- First, these theories have been popularized and are becoming ubiquitous in our society even where the philosophical foundations are not well known, are completely absent, or have been minimized. In other words, the links between intellectual debates in academia and the intuitions and instincts of the average person are hard to trace, but also hard to deny. At a broad societal level, we are talking about things differently than we were fifty years ago – not to mention a century ago.

- Second, if there is a commonality in the target of each of these versions of critical theory, we might summarize it this way: they are opposed to an ordered or structured society. If they speak at all of what kind of society they would build after deconstruction, it is loosely in terms of a radical egalitarianism or equality.

But note: this means that what God is building in the church is, either directly or indirectly, in the way of the project of critical theories. In other words, a society in which only *men* are qualified to be elders and exercise the ministry of the Word (1 Tim 2:12-15), in which husbands and wives are each called to *distinct, complementary* roles (Eph 5:22-33), in which age and maturity garner respect and deference (1 Pet 5:5, 1 Tim 5:1-2; cf. Prov 16:31), and children obey their parents (not vice versa)…that kind of ordered society, in the eyes of critical theory, is conceived of as structurally unjust and oppressive.

<u>Response</u>

Two key things we need to recognize here:

When terms change, arguments change.

Sociologist Mark Chaves' book *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* contains a very helpful insight for us here.[3] Chavez is supportive of women's ordination, but his book attempts to neutrally examine the history of this debate in American religious organizations, using sociological tools to analyze trends and developments. In his chapter "The Changing Meaning of Women's Ordination," he makes a fascinating point: while the *practice* of ordaining women could be found in American churches as early as the 1830's, the *meaning* of women's ordination changed dramatically from the 1800's to the middle of the 20th century. In the earliest examples, where women's ordination was practiced, it was seen almost

[2] Angela Parker, "If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I?," *EerdWord* (blog), September 14, 2021, https://eerdword.com/if-god-still-breathes-why-cant-i/. The text quoted is from Eerdman's press release regarding the book, *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I?*

[3] Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

exclusively as a matter of mission mobilization and personal calling; but after the rise of second-wave feminism, women's ordination was seen almost exclusively in terms of justice and gender equality.

> "Although it may be difficult for late twentieth-century observers to think of conflict over women's ordination as an issue of anything other than basic gender equality, that fusion of practice and idea is a cultural achievement of the liberal wing of the nineteenth-century women's movement."[4]
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> "These examples illustrate the point: this gender equality frame for conflicts over women's ordination, almost completely absent in the 1830s and becoming noticeable in the conflicts after the Civil War, is today the dominant way in which these conflicts are understood."[5]
>
> "These connections add further support to the basic thesis of this chapter: social proximity to the secular women's movement changes the meaning of women's ordination. Although conflicts over female preaching and women's ordination occur with or without a larger women's movement, conflicts that occur in the context of this larger movement are more likely to be under stood as conflicts over the principle of gender equality."[6]

Let me apply that last paragraph to us: social proximity to movements based in critical theory will change the meaning of debates about justice within the church. This is not to say we must abandon all talk of biblical justice. But we *must* be aware of the way these terms are being used in critical theory. Our discussions of complementarianism and sexual ethics *will* be influenced by social movements influenced by critical theory. If we are not aware of this, we are laying the foundations for an erosion of these key areas of our doctrine in the next generation. See the appendix of quotes for more documentation.

Words matters – but so do word families.

To say it using a metaphor: words aren't orphans. They come from word families. And sometimes, even when words appear to share the same name, they come from very different word families.

To say it without the metaphor: given the interlocking logic of the various families of critical theories, two dangers present themselves to us.

- First danger: we can confuse biblical words, imbedded in a biblical network of meaning, with secular words, imbedded in a critical theory network of meaning. We must be very careful to define what we mean (not only words, but word families) when we speak of structural injustice, oppression, marginalization, or abuse of power, or similar terms.

[4] Chaves, 66.

[5] Chaves, 75.

[6] Chaves, 79.

- Second danger: by potentially affirming a genuine insight in a given instance of critical theory (especially if that affirmation doesn't take account of the first danger above), we can risk affirming the underlying structure of the argument. Example: is "white privilege" in the same family as "male privilege?" Why or why not? Careless use of language here, or the unthinking acceptance of a system like critical race theory, will carry grave dangers.

If we ignore dangers one and two, then we run the risk of making statements now about particular areas of social justice that could shape the intuitions of our children to conclude that a *man* preaching week-by-week is an unjust act that marginalizes women. Remember Chavez's insight above. We are not talking about a hypothetical world; these kinds of arguments are being made by egalitarian writers regularly. And others (not necessarily the same voices) are taking the same arguments and applying them to the exclusion of sexual minorities from the pulpit, church leadership, etc. Words matter – but so do word families.

Strangers and aliens – not hybrids.

If there is a broad category of biblical truth that protects us from these dangers, it would perhaps be best summarized as a robust ecclesiology: a deep sense of our identity as a *separate* society, a distinct people, whose citizenship is in heaven (and not in this world). Our goal is to help our people see that increasingly our logic, language, habits, and moral instincts and impulses, will look increasingly *strange* to our culture (to the degree that we are biblical and not conformed to our culture!). Remember: there's a reason they call strangers *strange*…

But note: we are strangers and aliens, not hybrids. Our goal is not to find a middle ground between right and left. Christians are strangers and aliens not because we are a hybrid mix of either side of contemporary debates. We are strangers and aliens because we belong to another city, and submit to another Lord. Are we prepared to be those kinds of strangers and aliens? Or, out of a desire to build bridges and find common ground, are we too quick to assume we can reason from the same starting points and same basic concepts as the world around us?

Suggestion: learn to read Scripture with these eyes yourself as a pastor. Become familiar with the themes of the new people of God, the new humanity created in Christ, the society called out of darkness into marvelous light, and the implications for what we believe, do, and practice. Then train your people to do the same by the way you regularly expound and apply texts week after week. We should find ourselves saying something like this regularly: "You realize, don't you, that what we just saw in our text really doesn't make *any* sense unless we believe Jesus was raised from the dead (or there really is a transcendent, eternal Creator, or we really do believe there is a coming new creation, etc.)?"

Connect the sacraments to our distinct identity: every baptism, every celebration of the Lord's Supper, is an event marking us out as Christ's bride, those who belong to the city of God and not the city of man. Use these opportunities to cultivate our corporate sense of identity as the ransomed and redeemed people of God.

Sermon series ideas: New Testament books like Ephesians, 1 Peter, Revelation; Old Testament books like Exodus, Deuteronomy, Daniel, or Ezra-Nehemiah.

2. Political Idolatry

Definition: the moral condition in which our society translates ultimate hopes and fears to the political realm. Or, in different terms, the "moral arms race" theory of political parties.

A more expanded analysis:

- Note: this is my attempt at a *Christian* diagnosis of a *worldly* (especially American) problem. I am not primarily focusing on identifying instances of political idolatry in the hearts of individual Christians, or churches – though such sins exist! But remember our larger topic: cultural pressures on the church of Christ. I am here trying to provide a biblical analysis of a cultural phenomenon *that creates the context* in which we may be tempted to political idolatry ourselves…or may find ourselves increasingly politically homeless in days to come. Either way, the cultural phenomenon is a reality, an environment in which we find ourselves, which presses against us, and in which we and must pursue intelligent faithfulness.

- The "moral arms race theory" of political parties (my own term). Three stages:

    - First: one of two things happens.
        - Option A) Through cultural developments, secularization, etc., a society loses a shared belief in a transcendent realm that might counter-balance the political, earthly realm. Hopes and fears are then detached from this realm, and gradually come to reside in the earthly, political realm.
        - OR, Option B): the present political situation is "eschatologized:" eschatological or millennial hopes are tied in some way to a current political development.
        - Result: Whether because of the net loss of a belief in any transcendent realm, or whether through a falsely realized version of transcendence in which politics (or military conquest) can bring heaven to earth, the ultimate hopes and fears of a society are located in this earthly realm.

    - Second: the moral arms race of politics begins. One side or political party begins to use this kind of language and define its identity in increasingly *oppositional* and *ultimate* terms. How will the other side inevitably respond? An escalation of the same.

    - Result: political realm is divided into an "us vs. them" mentality. Society becomes increasingly polarized, and our intuitions and instincts are shaped in oppositional terms. Disagreements become about increasingly fundamental and ultimate matters on which compromise is difficult, if not impossible. The goal of political society becomes total defeat of the other side, and whatever means or positions are necessary to achieve that end are seen as legitimate.[7]

[7] Two secular books, Ezra Klein's *Why We're Polarized* and Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*, attempt to American politics and account for the undeniable fact of our current state of polarization. Both have helpful

Examples:

Historically, Option B above ("eschatologizing" the present political moment) seems to be a reoccurring temptation for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Examples:

- The German city of Magdeburg in the decades after the Lutheran Reformation.[8]
- The Radical Reformation in the city of Munster in roughly the same time period.[9]
- Richard Baxter and his book/vision for *A Holy Commonwealth*.[10]
- American examples:

In American theology, there historically has been a tendency to blend eschatology and national identity. Peter Leithart describes this as a "nationalistic eschatology" in which the lines between church and nation in God's eschatological program become blurred (think how the language of "a city on a hill" has functioned in American discourse).

> "The Puritan Founders of New England were orthodox Christians in all their theological beliefs, but they laid the foundations for Americanism because of their tendency toward a nationalist, an-ecclesial reading of Scripture, *their enthusiasm for nationalistic eschatology*, and their privatization and individualization of the Eucharist. As Americanism developed, these tendencies settled into habits, and the result was the fourth great biblical religion (emphasis added)."[11]

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insights, but both suffer from the weakness of being forced to explain divisions in terms of some form of evolutionary psychological mechanisms. Both resort to some version of "group identity" as an explanation for why we are politically polarized – but that only describes, not explains. Why are we currently so prone to place our hopes and fears in *this* group identity, and not another identity? See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013); Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

[8] I cite this example because, oddly, one of the documents related to this city, the Magdeburg Confession, has been making a resurgence in some Reformed circles. See Doug Wilson's blog post "A Jehoiada Situation": https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/a-jehoiada-situation.html. Wilson (who I have much respect for in many areas!) cites Matthew J. Trewhella, *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates: A Proper Resistance to Tyranny and a Repudiation of Unlimited Obedience to Civil Government* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); and the self-published English translation of the Magdeburg Confession that Trewhella funded, Matthew Colvin, trans., *The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD* (CreateSpace Independent Pub, 2012). Due respect to all parties involved, the alleged theological lessons drawn from these documents are historically ill-informed. For a better treatment with less cherry-picking of the data, see Nathan Rein, *The Chancery of God: Protestant Print, Polemic and Propaganda against the Empire, Magdeburg 1546–1551* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[9] On this, see George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Third Edition (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2000), 120–38.

[10] Richard Baxter, *Baxter: A Holy Commonwealth*, ed. William Lamont (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See especially the "Meditations" that end the book, which are in effect Baxter's journal entries in 1659 when the restoration of the monarchy is imminent and the "holy commonwealth" is on the verge of collapse.

[11] Peter J. Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast: America and Empires in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 66.

> "Beginning with the Puritans, and more insistently since, heretical Americanist typology has pushed the church to the political margins and replaced it with the American nation itself."[12]
>
> This "nationalistic eschatology" is similar to what historian Robert Tracy McKenzie describes as a "democratic faith" and "democratic gospel" in which Americans trust ourselves and our political system with an inappropriate degree of hope (labeling something "undemocratic" is always a criticism, never a compliment).
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> "…is part of the problem of American democracy that we Americans think too highly of ourselves? Could a constructive first step be consciously to redefine ourselves as 'We the *Fallen* People'?...Although it won't magically unify our polarized society, I'm convinced that a necessary first step to a healthier democracy will be to jettison two of our most deeply held democratic assumptions. We must renounce *democratic faith*, our unthinking belief that democracy is intrinsically just. We must disavow the *democratic gospel*, the 'good news' that we are individually good and collectively wise."[13]

There are forms of this wrongly eschatological thinking currently pressuring the American church; e.g. the rise of bizarre conspiracy theories that blend "prophecy" and right-wing political predictions related to Donald Trump.

American culture broadly, however, is trapped somewhere between Option A (no transcendence) and Option B (eschatologizing the present): we have the impulses and intuitions shaped by eschatological nationalism, but no transcendent belief to ground those instincts. So we have, in effect, a civic religious war between two sides with all of the fervor, but without a sacred text or a savior. Politics increasingly becomes a false redeemer, a promise that the brokenness can be mended or its mirror image, bitterness and cynicism that political promises have failed. So where does this leave the church of Christ?

<u>Response:</u>

Again, we must keep for ourselves, and instill in our churches, a robust sense of the church's identity as a *distinct* and *eschatological* community.

- Distinct: marked off from the world by baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- Eschatological: the only society whose present existence, Lord's Day by Lord's Day, belongs to the life of the age to come.

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[12] Leithart, 110.

[13] Robert Tracy McKenzie, *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 12. See also McKenzie's summary describing changes in understanding of the collective "goodness" of "we the people" in Andrew Jackson's time: "In what it declared about human nature, Jacksonian democracy flatly contradicted the convictions of the Founding Fathers, even while paying them homage. In the process, it proclaimed an American gospel in conflict with centuries of Christian orthodoxy and the precepts of Scripture." McKenzie, 128.

Anything that you can do to cultivate this identity in your church will help protect us from the pressures that come from living in an age of political idolatry. See suggestions above. More specifically, I think this pressure calls forth particular responses in us as pastors, and as we care for our church members.

For Pastors:

When we address the pressures brought about by this aspect of our culture, we are doing what is often called political theology or public theology (i.e., considering how the Bible gives us a doctrinal framework to think about politics and public issues). But these are *complex* subjects. Therefore:

- Be slow to speak, especially from the pulpit or on social media – places where your voice appears to be speaking for the church corporately. Are we willing to put the reputation of the Lord Jesus Christ and his church on the line for *this* stance, *this* political moment? Some things *do* call for us to do so; but we must be careful and precise in our biblical and theological rationale to arrive at such a place. Speak less, and be more explicit and intentionally careful in your biblical and theological grounds when you do.

- Ask yourself: when I *do* speak on topics that arise from the political sphere, do I tend to refer to one or two biblical references only as my justification? E.g.: "Romans 13, therefore submit to all mandates;" or, "Acts 5 (we must obey God rather than man), therefore resistance to all mandates." A selective appeal to Scripture is a sign we are not thinking carefully enough about the topic.

There is an additional reason for care. The problem with arms races is that they don't end with finish lines – though sometimes they end with mushroom clouds. It is difficult to see an easy way for our current political polarization to be healed, and that increases the likelihood that we will be facing as pastors more and more challenges in the relationship between church and state. Therefore:

- In our leadership and our public communications, don't think only of the immediate issue at hand. Think about more distant repercussions, and whether the positions we take now are preparing our churches to handle the pressures we may face next year, in five years, ten years, etc.

- Example: resistance or compliance to mandates (mask, vaccine, etc.). How do we think through these issues as pastors, and lead our churches? Two dangers:
    - Too quickly assuming that Romans 13 means we obey all mandates, period. If this is our default, are we setting up our church for a major disconnect if we face a mandate to officiate a same-sex wedding, or teach gender-inclusive material at our Christian schools?
    - Too quickly citing "the doctrine of the lesser magistrates" or "consent of the governed" as a justification for resistance. If this is our default, are we setting a pattern that undermines the legitimacy of government? And are we prepared for the consequences? "Resistance theory" unfortunately has none of the friction of actual resistance – which, in other contexts, goes by names like fines, arrest, or

armed conflict. The cause of Christ may call us to such extremities – but let's make absolutely sure it is the cause of *Christ*.

See the footnoted resources for further study.[14]

For Church Members:

Our people are facing, and are going to continue to face, many competing voices claiming their attention and vying with Scripture for ultimate authority. A politically idolatrous society seeks to recruit converts, not help everyone lead "peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:2). If you're not aware of how politics is attempting to catechize and disciple your church members, you should be. Two categories seem especially relevant:

The danger of political idolatry – moral allies do not make theological friends.

- If earlier we spoke of political idolatry as a diagnosis of *secular* culture, here we are speaking of it as a temptation for Christian hearts (pastors included). It is quite possible for politics to steal our affections and hopes away from our Savior and place them on parties or leaders. "Put not your trust in princes" (Psa 146:3) is a command we must hold out to our churches and our own hearts.

- Further: Christians are vulnerable to the lie that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." When that becomes "the (political) enemy of my (political) enemy is my (religious) friend," we are in grave danger of confusing temporary agreement about a moral point with theological agreement and identity. We must not lose our theological distinctiveness because we momentarily share a voting interest with any particular political group. Point: moral allies do not make theological friends.

[14] I highly recommend Jonathan Leeman's work as a starting point: Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (InterVarsity Press, 2016); Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age* (Thomas Nelson, 2018). David VanDrunen is another very helpful thinker. His most relevant work for pastors is David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

It is also very helpful to understand historical context for many of these debates, especially in the American church. For this, Mark Noll's work is helpful. (Note: I am commending him as an historian, not necessarily as a theologian – while I don't remember any strong points of disagreement with Noll's theological evaluations, I am recommending him for his expertise on American church history, not necessarily the conclusions he may draw from that history.) See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2002); for an overview, and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), for an honest assessment of the failure of the American church at another time of great political crisis. McKenzie's book, cited earlier, is also a helpful historical evaluation of the notion of "we the people" from the time of the Founding to the Jacksonian era. His concluding lessons are not uniformly insightful, but the historical analysis is very helpful. McKenzie, *We the Fallen People*.

Peter Leithart is in a category by himself. His book *Between Babel and Beast* is a theological and historical analysis of the concept of "empire" and America's status in light of that evaluation. While there are several points on which I disagree with Leithart, he is especially helpful in highlighting the impulse in American church history to blur the line between church and nation as recipient of eschatological promises. Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast*.

Eschatological confusion – "as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup" is a reliable eschatological time marker. "What the Spirit is saying to this generation" is not.

- While they may seem to be fringe voices, there are Christian figures interpreting the present moment in terms of eschatological signs, the "last generation," etc. Conspiracy theories, political statements, and alleged "prophecy" then get blended into an unholy alliance. These *are* fringe voices; unfortunately, they are fringe voices with Twitter accounts and YouTube channels. And so they can influence our members.

- Seize opportunities publicly and privately to help retrain our "eschatological clocks." We *are* in the last days – but we have been in the last days since Christ ascended to heaven. Blending quotes from Revelation and "what the Spirit is saying to this last generation" says nothing about whether we are closer to Christ's return. But every time we gather to worship on the Lord's Day, every time we take the Lord's Supper, we are one Sunday closer to Christ's return than last week. "As often as you eat the bread and drink the cup" is a reliable eschatological time marker; "what the Spirit is saying to this generation" is not.

3. The Modern Self

Definition: the view that the self is a project, and a solo project. The purpose of life is authentic self-expression. Or, to put it in a slogan, the "you do you" world.

Note: I am using language and concepts that are very helpfully traced in Carl Trueman's book *The Triumph of the Modern Self*.[15] I highly recommend this book to understand this point in depth. To present Trueman's argument in brief:

- Beginning in the Enlightenment, and Romantic responses to the Enlightenment, and continuing into the present era, there has been a revolution in the way in Western society think about our individual identities. Personal identity, the meaning and purpose of life, is largely seen as something we create from within, not something receive from without.

- As with critical theories, the intellectual backstory is complex. The pattern, however, is simple. One generation's ideas become the next generation's unthinking intuitions and impulses. The process repeats itself, gathering layers of ideas that then become unquestioned assumptions.

- The modern self is the result of three such movements. Our sense of self became *psychologized*; the psychologized self became *sexualized*; and the psychologized, sexualized self became *politicized*.

[15] Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

Examples:

The result of all this is that politics is a form of self-expression. Sexuality is a form of self-expression. And self-expression is, at root, a matter of subjective, personal experience. The self is a solo project, and its tools are drawn from every realm of human experience.

There are obvious cultural ramifications of the above sequence. But it would be a mistake to think this is limited to an "out there" problem. As Trueman says, we are all expressive individualists now. So it's more helpful to draw our examples from ordinary life rather than academic theories.

- A set of clothes my middle daughter received at her birth, stamped with a butterfly and the label "BeYOUtiful." As a thought experiment, imagine trying to explain what this means to Martin and Katie Luther…

- Lunch meeting with a church member: a hamburger at Five Guys, followed by coffee at Starbucks. As a thought experiment (for the mathematically inclined): calculate how many options existed for personal customization of my burger and latte. "Your coffee, your way." How does the near universal presence of endless customization in every area of life shape the way we think about life itself? Or about the faith once delivered?

- A twenty-minute YouTube video on how to use a blacksmith hammer (yes, I watched it): nineteen minutes of hammer technique, and sixty seconds of philosophy: "I want you to have the tools for creative expression. Whether you forge knives, cook, sew, sculpt, ride motorcycles…all of these are for creative expression."

The point is not to critique the individual worth and beauty of "you," nor to argue against numerous menu options, nor to say that creativity cannot be a God-given expression of the *imago Dei*. In a biblical framework, we could say something about each of these examples. The point is to highlight how universal these options and assumptions are. We live in the "you do you" world. We are all expressive individualists now.

Response:

Before considering how we respond as the church, consider how this last pressure point helps explain our first two points. Critical theories are plausible in our society because, if an expressive self is hindered in some way, the reason must be a form of oppression. And such oppression must itself be opposed, and overthrown. Political idolatry is toxic because politics is now an expression of the self. Identity politics is not something the other side does; identity politics is what expressive individualists do in the politic arena. Yes, politics has always been personal; but the notion of personhood has changed. Political disagreement has been internalized. If parties are an expression of the self, then the other side is not only voting differently – they are attacking my side's personal identity.

In light of all of this, how do we respond?

“The creature has only two options...”

Listen to Herman Bavinck:

> “The only appropriate reaction of a creature is to acquiesce in God's good pleasure. A creature really has a choice between only two options: either it chooses to be its own creator and thereby cease to be a creature, or it must be and remain a creature from beginning to end, and therefore owes its existence and the specific nature of its existence only to God.”[16]

Positively, look for ways in your sermons, your calls to worship, your extra teaching options to highlight the goodness of our Creator, and the joy that comes from being a creature of such a good Creator God. There’s a reason the creation psalms are such happy psalms (“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”): it is a good thing to be a creature when your Creator is the God of steadfast love, faithfulness, and goodness. Negatively, in your sermon application, and in your private counseling, help people see the brokenness, disappointments, and casualties that inevitably follow in the wake of “you do you.” The creature only has two options; one of those options brings life, and one brings death.

“The faith once-delivered,” not “your faith, your way.”

Seize every opportunity in public worship to root our identity in something larger than ourselves. Use historic creeds and confessions in your worship, and remind your church that these things predate us. Sing hymns. Remind yourself and your church regularly: the Bible “customizes” us. We do not customize the Bible. It would be a sad thing to live and die trusting in a customized faith. Can a “your faith, your way,” lay anyone in the ground in confident hope of the resurrection? But there is great comfort living and dying in an objective faith that has sharp edges and firm foundations, a faith that predates us and will outlast us. Preach the faith once delivered, not your faith, your way.

[16] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 376.

APPENDIX 1: QUOTES ON CRITICAL THEORIES

<u>What is critical theory? Definitions from primary sources:</u>

"Critical Theory," dictionary entry from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

The first quote demonstrates broad and narrow definitions of critical theory. The broader meaning is closer to what I am using above, and why I general speak of critical theories in the plural. Note also how the quote shows the inherently liberating/emancipation tendency in these theories, and the use of "domination" and "freedom" language.

> "Critical Theory has a narrow and a broad meaning in philosophy and in the history of the social sciences. 'Critical Theory' in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a 'critical' theory may be distinguished from a 'traditional' theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human 'emancipation from slavery', acts as a 'liberating … influence', and works 'to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of' human beings (Horkheimer 1972b [1992, 246]). Because such theories aim to explain and transform *all* the circumstances that enslave human beings, many "critical theories" in the broader sense have been developed. They have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies. In both the broad and the narrow senses, however, a critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms."[17]

The second quote shows how the broad definition of critical theories are intended to transform society, not merely describe what is:

> "It follows from Horkheimer's definition that a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation." [18]

Stephen Bronner's Oxford University Press volume, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Note: Bronner is himself a proponent of critical theory, so the quotes below are not negative interpretations by an outsider to the movement.

The first quote highlights the "subversive" nature of critical theory.

[17] James Bohman, "Critical Theory," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/critical-theory/.

[18] Bohman.

> "Philosophy has evidenced a subversive element from its inception…What became known as 'critical theory' was built upon this legacy. The new philosophical tendency was generated between World War I and World War II, and its most important representatives would wage an unrelenting assault on the exploitation, repression, and alienation embedded within Western civilization.

The second quote demonstrates the skeptical, anti-authority nature of critical theory, while the following quote makes explicit the anti-religious impulse in critical theory:

> "Critical theory refuses to identify freedom with any institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought. It questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice…Interdisciplinary and uniquely experimental in character, deeply skeptical of tradition and all absolute claims, critical theory was always concerned not merely with how things were but how they might be and should be. This ethical imperative led its primary thinkers to develop a cluster of themes and a new critical method that transformed our understanding of society."[19]

> "'If God is dead, then everything is permitted' was the mantra of Dostoyevsky and the faithful. But the fact is that innocents suffered and everything was permitted (i.e.. barbarism, pogroms, and wars) when, so to speak, God was alive. To assume that belief in the pre-political (if that term even has any meaning) will somehow bring the mullah together with the priest and the rabbi simply ignores the organizational interests of the mosque, the church, and the synagogue."[20]

The last quote describes Bonner's attempts to define future goals for critical theory. Note how the theory is inherently open-ended, always seeking new structural imbalances to overthrow:

> "New forms of critical theory…need to explain the triumph of counter-revolution in our time. The Frankfurt School did that for its age, and in the process its members enriched our understanding of the family, sexual repression, pedagogy, genocide, entertainment, literary analysis, and a host of other issues. They helped clarify the structural imbalances of power that mark the economy, the state, the public sphere, law, and global life. Illuminating conditions of oppression, opening avenues of resistance, and refashioning liberating ideals remain the core aims of the critical tradition. New perspectives are required, however, to cultivate transformative prospects within an increasingly global society, and, in turn, this call for subjecting critical theory to ongoing critical interrogation. But that is as it should be. Only in this way can critical theory remain true to the original spirit of the critical enterprise."[21]

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay. This book is

[19] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–2.

[20] Bronner, 118.

[21] Bronner, 122–23.

written by two opponents of critical theory; however, neither Pluckrose and Lindsay are evangelicals (Lindsay is a self-described atheist) or political conservatives. They critique critical theories from a rationalist, classical liberal perspective.

> "Theory [Pluckrose and Lindsay's umbrella term] assumes that objective reality cannot be known, 'truth' is socially constructed through language and 'language games' and is local to a particular culture, and knowledge functions to protect and advance the interests of the privileged. Theory therefore explicitly aims to critically examine discourses. This means something specific. It means to examine them closely so as to expose and disrupt the political power dynamics it assumes are baked into them so that people will be convinced to reject them and initiate an ideological revolution."[22]

How distinct are critical theories from one another?

My purpose here is to justify my claim that the various critical theories are not distinct entities, but share an intellectual DNA that inherently draws them to one another. In other words, the logic is the same although the target of critique may differ. This makes it very important for us to understand the ways in which discussions in one area "migrate" to another; e.g., discussions about racial injustice migrate to be about gender injustice.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward." The first quote summarizes the history of the formation of CRT, and the various other ideological families that formed groups within the nascent movement.

> "In the context of these ongoing dialogues, there were loose factions within CLS [Critical Legal Studies] roughly corresponding to various ideological leanings, but also crosscut by informal identity groups. Thus, while there were the white male heavies, feminists, the emerging race crits, the 'after-identity' crits, there were also allegiances between and among these groups in terms of individual sympathies (or allergies) to neo-Marxism, post-modernism, liberal integrationism, radical feminism, leftist Black nationalism and the like…Thus, feminists who were otherwise split by their intellectual allegiances to post-modernism or dominance paradigms might converge to critique a specific expression of male power; white males – themselves an aggregation of disparate intellectual adherents – might themselves split in response to feminists or emergent race theorists; and so on. It was in the midst of this rich and deeply politicized discursive space that elements of a critical race sensibility began to take shape."[23]

The second quote explains why this critical theory chose legal philosophy as its target of criticism, how the notion of rationality itself was also critiqued, and how this attack on knowledge itself migrated across academic disciplines.

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[22] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 47.

[23] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward," *Connecticut Law Review* 43, no. 5 (June 2011): 1289, https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law_review/117.

> "Indeed, one was able to see how the claim to rationality itself – [appeal to] 'the rule of law' rather than to the 'politics of the mob,' – helped to rationalize existing racial power…Thus, the critique of the apolitical character of law merged with a concrete critique of the epistemological claims of the Enlightenment tradition more generally… My sense here is that breaking down the concept of 'knowledge' that seemed necessary to contest the claims of the law's neutrality in the late 1980s and 1990s is what migrated well across disciplines."[24]

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias, eds., *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities.* The first quote speaks of shared alliances between feminist, queer, and trans studies based on a shared epistemological perspective and a shared goal of "problematizing" normative structures.

> "Feminists and transfeminists have been able to build alliances based on their common interests and to further problematize how gender is defined within a system of power relations that privileges normative expressions at the expense of what are considered nonnormative gender expressions. Notions like cisgender and transgender explore further how embodiment, perceived identification, and lived experience take gender beyond the confines of the binary oppositions of feminine/masculine and butch/femme. 'Cisgenderism,' on the other hand, enriches and add precision to terms such as sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism, by referring specifically to the denial, pathologization, and denigration of nonnormative gender identities and by questioning the dichotomous category of sex assigned at birth…By taking the epistemic perspective of the dissidents, both fields have resisted more easily the white middle-class perspectives that were and are sometimes still dominant in some feminist and LGB circles."[25]

The second quote demonstrates how trans theory conceives of gender in similar ways to other theories of racialization. The point here is to demonstrate an underlying logic in the critical theories that are nowhere near to a biblical vision of race/ethnicity or gender.

> "At this particular juncture, it is interesting to note that questioning the relationship between embodiment and gender identity suddenly locates gender in a similarly intractable space to the one usually assigned to race and ethnicity. Our embodied readability as gendered and racialized subjects therefore presents a very specific limit to ways of knowing and being in the world that are inscribed upon or signified by the body, or framed as culturally intelligible (Butler 1999). This is another moment when the comparison with the normative – both heteronormative and homonormative – can be (and has been) a creative space for critical reflection."[26]

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[24] Crenshaw, 1309.

[25] Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias, eds., *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 6–7.

[26] Miguel and Tobias, 233.

Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution, Susan Stryker. The first quote demonstrates how an underlying logic of structural oppression links indigenous peoples, slavery, and masculine oppression of women. Stryker extends this logic to argue that trans people are in the same category: a minority misunderstood and oppressed by an unjust social hierarchy.

> "Because members of minority groups are, by definition, less common than members of majority groups, minorities often experience misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination. Society tends to be organized in ways that either deliberately or unintentionally favor the majority, and ignorance or misinformation about a less common way of being in the world can perpetuate harm ful stereotypes and mischaracterizations. On top of that, society can actually privilege some kinds of people over other kinds of people, with the former benefiting from the exploitation of the lat ter: settlers benefited from the appropriation of indigenous lands, slaveholders benefited from the labor of the enslaved, men have benefited from the inequality of women. Violence, law, and custom hold these social hierarchies in place."[27]

The second quote links American political developments with trans and "other minority" rights. It also serves to illustrate the "moral arms race" political moment we inhabit. As readers consider how one side in this cultural and political war is responding, imagine how the other side will respond in turn (i.e., moral escalation and increasing polarization). While either of these lead to peaceful and quiet life for the church? This should caution us against linking the reputation and church of the Lord Jesus Christ with any political party.

> "It has been inspiring to see so many forms of grassroots activism spring up in trans communities, in alliance with many other communities, in resistance to the US government's sudden rightward lurch, and to what that shift likely means for trans people and other minorities – everything from stockpiling hormones that may no longer be available through the health care system so that they can be distributed in the years ahead, to setting up legal clinics helping people rush through name and gender change paperwork while they still can, to calling the offices of elected officials to register disagreement and opposition to specific policies or proposals, to seeking weapons and martial arts training for self-defense. As 'alt-right,' white-supremacist, and right-wing populist provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos, David Duke, and Ann Coulter – emboldened by the Trump victory and the presence of reactionary Breitbart News mastermind Steve Bannon in the White House as Trump's chief strategist – increasingly target transgender people in deliberately inflammatory public statements made under the guise of 'free speech,' trans resistance has escalated in response, including highly visible participation in disruptive 'antifa' (antifascist) and 'black bloc; anarchist counteractions. Notably, trans activists and allies repeatedly vandalized and obstructed the path of the so called Free Speech Bus, sponsored by a Far Right religious organization, that attempted

[27] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Second edition (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 7–8.

> to tour the United States to promote the idea that it's impossible to actually be transgender, and that transgender people don't really exist."[28]

The final quote, from the last paragraph of Stryker's book, illustrates how the trans movement is self-consciously appropriating the mantle of the civil rights movement.

> "'Making history' is an action that we take today, in the present moment, that links our understanding of the past to the future we strive to build. In his essay 'The Uses and Abuses of History for the Present,' the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche noted that rich and powerful people have little use for history other than as a raw material to build a monument to their own greatness, whereas most people look to the past merely with a sense of nostalgia, hoping to find there something familiar and comforting to salve the alienations of present day. 'Only those who are crushed by a present circumstance,' Nietzsche said, 'and who are determined at all cost to throw off their oppression,' have any need for a critical relationship to the history that has produced them. This little book, written as an approachable introductory text on transgender history in the United States, will have achieved its modest goal if it helps its readers to develop just a critical historical consciousness. As the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, paraphrasing the nineteenth-century abolitionist Theodore Parker, 'the arc of the moral universe is long'; like him, we must have faith that it 'bends toward justice.' But like him, as well, we can do more than cross our fingers and hope for the best if we ourselves work together to bend our little corner of the universe in that direction."[29]

How prevalent are critical theories in evangelicalism?

The following series of quotes are pulled from new book promos within the evangelical world, largely American, with one quote of UK provenance. (There is also a quote by Wesley Hill from the afterword to a recent book defending traditional marriage while unquestioningly drawing on the language of "sexual minorities.") My intent here is to document how various families of critical theories are naturally drawn towards one another (note especially the way in which racial and gender issues are merged), and to demonstrate that these migrations are already taking place within evangelicalism. These quotes, I believe, demonstrate that validity of Chavez' observation: proximity to social movements changes the meaning of the debate within churches and institutions.

Promo for *The Making of Biblical Womanhood,* Beth Allison Barr

> "Biblical womanhood–the belief that God designed women to be submissive wives, virtuous mothers, and joyful homemakers–pervades North American Christianity. From choices about careers to roles in local churches to relationship dynamics, this belief shapes the everyday lives of evangelical women. Yet biblical womanhood isn't biblical, says Baylor University historian Beth Allison Barr. It arose from a series of clearly definable historical moments…Interweaving her story as a Baptist pastor's wife, Barr

[28] Stryker, 232.

[29] Stryker, 235–36.

sheds light on the #ChurchToo movement and abuse scandals in Southern Baptist circles and the broader evangelical world, helping readers understand why biblical womanhood is more about human power structures than the message of Christ."[30]

Promo for *Heavy Burdens*: *Seven Ways LGBTQ People Experience Harm in the Church*, Bridget Eileen Rivera

"Religious faith reduces the risk of suicide for virtually every American demographic except one: LGBTQ people. Generations of LGBTQ people have felt alienated or condemned by the church. It's past time that Christians confronted the ongoing and devastating effects of this legacy. Breaking down the issues both historically and socially, *Heavy Burdens* (Brazos Press, 2021) provides an honest account of the ways in which LGBTQ people experience discrimination in the church, helping Christians grapple with hard realities and empowering churches to navigate a better path forward."[31]

Wesley Hill afterword in *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church*, by Darrin Snyder Belousek.

"Christians ought to mourn publicly the ways they have not only actively harmed lesbian, gay, and bisexual people but also passively stood by while their basic human freedoms (such as the right to visit a hospitalized partner) were being trampled on. The first and continual-posture Christians wishing to defend biblical teaching on marriage ought to adopt is a posture of repentance. Furthermore, Christians should commit themselves to the costly work of advocating for those who are vulnerable to the kind of discrimination described above."[32]

Promo for Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer The Church and the Famine of Grace, Jarel Robinson-Brown

"If the church is ever tempted to think that it has its theology of grace sorted, it need only look at its reception of queer black bodies and it will see a very different story

"In this honest, timely and provocative book, Jarel Robinson-Brown argues that there is deeper work to be done if the body of Christ is going to fully accept the bodies of those who are black and gay

"A vital call to the Church and the world that Black, Queer, Christian lives matter. this book seeks to remind the Church of those who find themselves beyond its fellowship yet who directly suffer from the perpetual ecclesial terrorism of the Christian community through its speech and its silence."

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[30] "The Making of Biblical Womenhood," Beth Allison Barr, accessed September 17, 2021, https://bethallisonbarr.com/. The quote is from the author's own description of the book on her website.

[31] "Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ People Experience Harm in the Church," *Bridget Eileen Rivera* (blog), accessed September 17, 2021, https://bridgeteileenrivera.com/heavy-burdens-seven-ways-lgbtq-people-experience-harm-in-the-church/. The quote is from the description of this new release from Brazos Press.

[32] Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 292. The quote is from the afterword written by Wesley Hill, though it is not inconsistent with the arguments made by Belousek throughout the book.