

Critical race theory can help us serve others

Why would we refuse that help?

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



Photo © Orbon Alija / E+ / Getty

The term “critical race theory” names many things, some beneficial and some perhaps less so. For Christians, sifting through the useful and less useful comes with the territory. We can no more avoid this careful work than we can avoid pursuing justice and equality while loving God and neighbor. The political conversation around CRT, however, has encouraged not care but rather its opposite: sweeping generalizations that either mischaracterize CRT or reject its ends outright. Or both.

Originally, CRT referred to academic scholarship *critical* of how *race* corrupts legal *theory*. It identified ways that racism ends up harming legal institutions, creating real-world consequences for education, housing, health care, and more. This attempt to ferret out racism’s long-term effects followed up on the civil rights movement’s aspirations for a more just and equitable society.

Like cellular biologists fighting cancer, critical race theorists committed themselves to the exacting work of finding and fighting racism wherever it reared its ugly head.

They knew that societies are just and equal in concrete ways or not at all, a fact that demands critical attention to racism's impact on courts, schools, neighborhoods, hospitals, and so on. CRT proved indispensable in the pursuit of justice and equality, helping institutionalize civil rights into the structures and systems of American life.

CRT has expanded to include a breadth of scholarship focused on racism's many facets. Considering racism's persistence and power, it shouldn't be surprising that CRT takes its job seriously—justice and equality demand nothing less. The expansion of CRT indicates that the dreams that inspired the civil rights movement continue to be admirably pursued as new generations claim for themselves, "Free at last!"

Like any developed academic discourse, CRT includes a wide range of intellectual commitments and scholarly methods, allowing for rigorous debate about CRT among its own practitioners. Today, CRT does not name one thing, so it doesn't lend itself to wholesale endorsement or dismissal. Blanket statements like "CRT has it all right" or "CRT is evil" say as little as a similar claim about cellular biology.

It makes more sense to assess a particular instance of CRT. This requires asking whether it lives up to its stated goals. If some instance of CRT proves useful in the pursuit of justice and equality, then rejecting it out of hand makes little sense. If it proves unhelpful, one should look elsewhere for available lights. Not all that goes by "cellular biology" is good cellular biology, and cellular biologists commit to the careful work of sorting these things out—because they love biology, and because this love serves others (for instance, people with cancer). So too for the theorist who studies racism, for whom knowledge is both its own good and good for others.

Do the odious efforts to ban and cancel whatever gets labeled as CRT have much to do with actual CRT? CRT commits to goods—justice and equality—that any morally serious person desires, and it encompasses a wide range of commitments and methods. So when people dismiss CRT out of hand, this suggests that either they don't know what they're talking about, they don't really care about justice and equality, or both. If they did, they would take the time to assess what helps and what doesn't. They would make use of what they find useful. This is what intellectually and morally serious people do.

The current conversation about CRT comes off as anything but intellectually and morally serious. It trades in strawman arguments, dog whistling, scare tactics, and virtue signaling. It talks about CRT in disingenuous ways in order to demonize others

and poison conversation. It makes sweeping statements about hugely important and complex issues in order to dumb down what society most needs right now: careful consideration.

The result of all this noise is that the mission of justice and equality stalls. Perhaps this is the point. Hannah Arendt, taking a page from Augustine, helps us understand this sort of pseudointellectual dishonesty and its horrid effects. She says that evil is banal, often taking the form of the dumb, the flat, and the obtuse.

Perhaps most troubling about anti-CRT posturing is how often Christians are behind it and how much it has taken root in Christian educational institutions. Loving God requires loving neighbor, and loving God and neighbor means loving them with our minds. This charges intellectual life with vocational meaning and invests Christian education with ultimate meaning. A Christian cellular biologist might envision their work vocationally as learning about God by learning about cells and loving their neighbor by working to, say, cure cancer.

Christians committed to loving God by loving neighbor will, like the Good Samaritan, use every tool in their toolbox to serve and love their neighbors, most certainly when neighbors suffer injuries. If in serving our injured neighbors we find certain things closed off to them, including things necessary for their well-being, then we will work to get our neighbors what they need.

If CRT can help us serve others—including helping us see when our helping hurts others—why would we refuse that help? Are we so sure of our ourselves, so self-certain and self-righteous, that we see no need for help? Do we not trust the Spirit to help us sift the useful from the less useful? Or are we only playing at politics, when we might otherwise serve the life of the mind in love of God and neighbor?