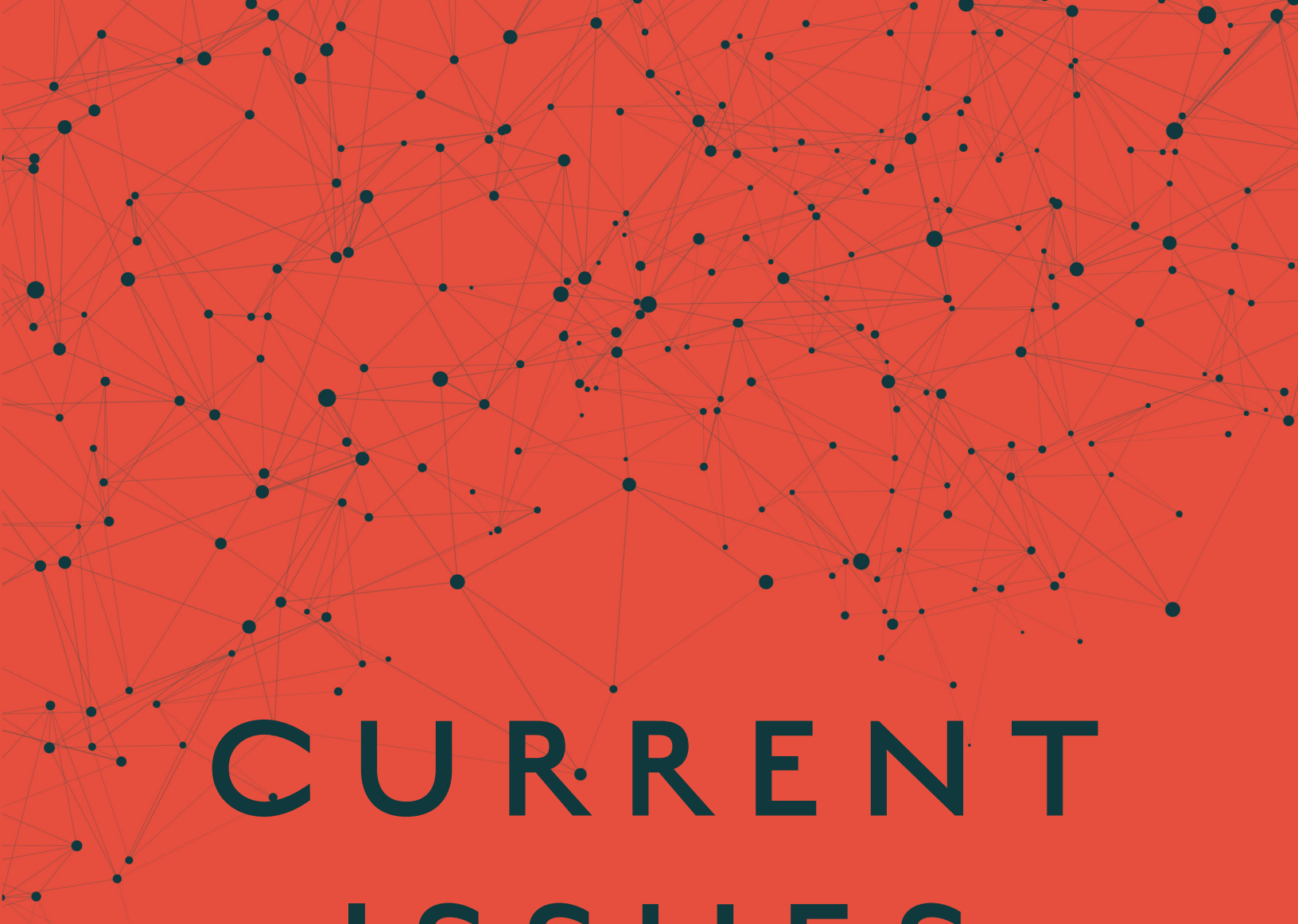




CURRENT ISSUES

FACING CLERGY

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Critical Race Theory

I believe race and racism may be the most pressing social issue of our time. That is saying a lot in the midst of acute political strife; a deadly pandemic; and economic, emotional and relational hardship. The many, long-unresolved problems of racism are constantly before us. They are opportunities for ministry, and they call for our attention.

Polls show that up to 76 percent of Americans believe that [racial discrimination remains a big problem in America](#). I don't think the impetus for this comes from Marxists, Socialists, the radical left or elitist academics. Racism is a human challenge that cannot be solved by name calling and thinking the worst of people's motivations. I believe what lies before us is an invitation from God for further, full repentance, amendment of life, and becoming advocates for constructive and faithful change.

Racism may also be the most urgent opportunity for mission in America. Listening with empathy to people of color helps more of us begin to understand that ongoing racial pain persists, despite the real progress that has been made in race relations and equality. People of color see and experience what White people can't. Thus, we must listen non-anxiously and openly, with a bent toward action.

As we come to the end of Black History Month, I want to say some things that I hope will keep the conversations about race moving forward toward solutions when the calendar turns to March 1.

Obstructing the Race Conversation

Recently I have been reflecting on a troubling pattern that began in the '50s and '60s. As a clergyman and prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a peaceful, agape-based, Jesus-inspired movement toward brotherhood. He did not riot, loot or burn things down. Knowing that *means* matter, MLK preached

sermons, made informed arguments, and led non-violent protests in order to win attention for his just cause. We could say for the sake of discussion that he was the perfect reformer. Yet he was consistently accused of being a Communist. It was a tactic to discredit him, to denounce the underlying basis of his efforts, to silence him and his movement, and to thwart the cause of justice.

Accusing King of being a Communist was ignorant, mean-spirited and false. MLK's vision was not rooted in 19th and 20th century social theorists, but in the ancient and foundational notion of agape love and the human brotherhood which God intended such love to produce. Seeing it as completely at odds with the narrative and telos of the biblical story, MLK frequently spoke out against Communism.

Unfortunately, in recent times many attempts to talk about racial inequalities have been met with similar suspicion and dismissal. "Well, that's just Critical Race Theory (CRT)...it is Marxist...and therefore un-Christian...it is the Church being co-opted by the radical secular left." Christian men and women who are laboring toward racial justice through a peaceful, agape-based, Jesus-inspired movement are consistently finding themselves being vilified for their supposed allegiance to a stream of Marxist thought.

While it is true that CRT (like many theoretical frameworks) has elements and advocates that are not Christian, that does not mean that the various tools of CRT, coming from various academic disciplines (not simply Marxism), have nothing to offer to our contemporary conversations on race. A pithy way to think



about this is that CRT *is simply trying to understand the hidden, underlying issues of race (or other forms of injustice) that go beyond the individual and express themselves structurally*. Understanding the structural nature of injustice, be it human trafficking in Latin America, child slavery in Asia, or racial discrimination in the United States, is fundamental to our work as missionaries. It is an act driven not by a secret devotion to Karl Marx, but by an open devotion to Jesus Christ and the neighbors he has given us to love.

And yet, in church communities it can often appear distressingly evident that for some, the main concern is not the actual oppression of our neighbors due to existing racism, but the potential oppression of the Church due to alleged Marxism. This is deeply concerning for two reasons.

The first is that it seems utterly out of touch with the concerns of our African American brothers and sisters. When we stop and listen to this community, what we find is neither pro-Marxist ideology nor anti-Marxist handwringing. Instead, we find men and women struggling—against the structures of our society—to live fully as free people in a traditional, open democracy. Indeed, this has been their cry for centuries. When we listen to Black perspectives, we see that the real issue is not the *potential* for Marxist oppression but the *reality* of systemic racial oppression.

The Black church has been trying for decades, previous to and outside of the CRT framework, to make some of the same points now being made by CRT theorists. I don't know of any orthodox Christian Black leader "buying into a false gospel" called Marxism. They are not anti-American or a threat to Christianity. CRT is not the secret ideological foundation of the Christian Black protest movement. I have not seen Black Christian leaders seek to victimize White males or destroy the structures of American life. Those things are antithetical to MLK's tradition of agape love and a beloved community for *all*. The Black leaders I know are Christ-centered and deserve the support of the whole Church. And when they see other Christian leaders gathering together to make dubious public condemnations of CRT while remaining utterly silent about structural racism, it only illustrates our blindness, harms our relationships, and inhibits our common mission.

The second concern I have is that Marxist allegations mischaracterize the actual beliefs of Christian leaders working in the area of race. I know thousands of Christian leaders all over the world and in most every denomination. None of these leaders who care about issues of race and want to work on it are motivated by CRT. In stark contrast, they are motivated by creation (Gen. 1:27; 3:20), by the patriarchs (Gen. 12:3), by the prophets (Amos 5:24), by Proverbs (31:8-9), by Jesus (Mt. 7:12; 22:39), by Paul (Acts 17:26; Romans 10:12; Gal. 3:26-28; Eph. 2:13-18; Phil. 2:3-4; Col. 3:11), by Peter (Acts 10:28, 34, 35) and by the revelation of racial and ethnic perfection given to John (Rev. 7:9).

Similar to MLK before them, today's Christian leaders—at least the ones I know—are animated not by being secular *social justice warriors*, but by the beautiful biblical vision of the oneness of all humanity in Christ, living with each other on the basis of agape love. I believe that charges of CRT leveled at "the Evangelical (or *Woke*) Left" are shallow, wrongly aimed, misleading and distracting. The truth is that rather than being seduced by an alleged "woke movement," our brothers and sisters are simply seeking to do what Jesus Himself asks of us: to remain awake and alert to the movement of the kingdom of God against the darkness of this world.

Following Jesus on Issues of Race

Our Lord's determination to lift up the poor, set free the captives, and cast down the proud means that the attempt to shut down Christian conversations about race by calling out "CRT!" will not be ultimately effective. Even so, those charges are a stumbling block to the important work of naming and correcting racial injustice and pursuing racial reconciliation in Christ's name and for his glory—work to which we in the Church are called, and work which our culture desperately needs. Falling back on CRT accusations may lead to a tragic situation in which those who are animated by faith in Christ to work for racial justice may be needlessly driven away from the Church.

It is time for us to turn our attention away from anxiously pointing out the potential dangers of CRT and instead give ourselves to the redemptive work of racial healing in our communities. This is where Jesus is leading us—and so many others—in this moment. And our work as missionaries is to follow Jesus, to give ourselves to the work of racial healing in this culture, and—as we do so—to live in alignment with MLK’s vision of agape and his commitment to work for the good of *all* of our neighbors via non-violent, direct action.

With that said, let’s continue to do a bit of thinking about CRT by defining some terms.

What Is Critical Race Theory?

Critical Thinking: This refers to the ability to correctly identify a problem; to hypothesize regarding the background and cause of the problem; to creatively determine possible solutions; to then test those ideas through research, gathering data, sorting it, such that it might unlock the best solution; to choose a solution and to implement it, analyzing as one goes along, identifying ways to improve on one’s solution. Those practices, in developmental ways, begin in childhood. They are basic, essential and time-honored. There is nothing anti-Christian about critical thinking. Every student is expected to do it.

Critical Theory: Critical theory is a multidisciplinary, theoretical and provisionally held constellation of attempts to discern, understand, theorize and critically expose the existence and meaning of observable patterns of cultural harm. In this sense, it encompasses both science and activism, seeking to both understand and to transform. Critical theorists seek to get beneath the surface of social life, digging beneath what shows up in polls and various studies. They desire to reveal the hidden assumptions—especially of power—that keep human beings from a full and true understanding of how the world is actually currently working.

Critical Race Theory: This is the attempt to use the tools of Critical Theory to understand deep issues of race. A simple way to put it is this: CRT seeks to reveal the racial work that still needs to be done after the Civil Rights Movement and the legislation that flowed from it. Yes, progress was made, but profound underlying issues still exist. Color still makes a difference in manifold ways. Discrimination and various forms of inequality still exist in America.

Such a statement seems utterly uncontroversial to me. It is not an attack on persons, churches or a nation. It can and should be the basis for growth and health, helping America and the Church to live into her fullest dream. When a person notices a severe weight problem, the answer is not to yell at the scale. When a person is told she has a cavity, the answer is not to belittle the dentist. And when certain social tools, even those with a non-Christian basis, are employed to expose reality, that is an opportunity to “lose weight,” to “get a filling”—to get healthy so as to flourish as a human being. The creative impulse, context and telos of such flourishing is not Marxist, but Divine.

All Truth Is God’s Truth

A solid way forward is to recall that *all truth is God’s truth*. If the lens of Critical Race Theory helps to truthfully identify underlying assumptions and structures that are otherwise hidden, isn’t that a gift, and the possible basis for healing and justice? Cosmology, psychology, sociology, anthropology and biology all have similar inherent possibilities for good and the same potential liabilities when untethered from a Christian worldview. And yet using those tools is rarely controversial. Where should the accent be today: criticizing our neighbors for their ideological impurity or choosing to help the oppressed in their time of need?

The obvious irony here is that as certain Christian thought leaders stand in the street blazing away in a culture-war gun battle, the work of Christ in fully-orbed salvation—deliverance, healing and fullness of life—is paralyzed because the Church can’t avert her eyes from the culture war to clearly see racial pain in the world. We are led to believe that the real problem is the Church under attack

from Marxism, when in fact the actual, more complex problem is that America, including large portions of the Church, has not fully come to grips with hundreds of years of racism and its ongoing implications for faithful Christian witness in America.

And this paralysis is a potent killer of mission. The angst of regular people on the streets of America is not the presence of a sinister ideology. It is a cry of deeply felt pain, weariness, exhaustion and grief. It pleads for action that brings hope for real, lasting change. It needs the stable support, teaching, friendship and love of the Church.

Biblical and Kingdom Collaboration

Denouncing CRT cannot be the only note being played in one's response to the racial challenges in America. The main response must be a *chord*. Anchored in the biblical narrative, White church leaders have the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with others: for instance, historians, sociologists and the keepers of the spiritual traditions of people of color—the ones who have walked “through the valley of the shadow of death” in their own experiences and have gained wisdom from it. It is incumbent on each Christian who seeks to love their neighbor to at least prayerfully seek the spiritual transformation of their heart/soul and to apply normal *critical thinking* to racial injustice.

We might begin with these steps:

1. Examine your heart for places of defensiveness, fear or racial prejudice.
2. Commit yourself to reading and listening to African Americans and other persons of color as they seek to teach us about these things.
3. As the truth of racial issues become clear, identify places in your life and in your sphere of influence where racial justice needs to take shape and how you might contribute to it.

4. Look to people who are leading in this work, learning the best ways to approach it.

5. Build strong, collaborative partnerships with African American communities; ask them what they most need from us; listen carefully; and then work to provide it. Be open to receiving from them as well.

6. Remember that formation and mission are lifelong processes. Move forward and do so in grace, knowing that Christ by his Spirit has gone before us and that we are companioned along the way!

I am moving forward with this heart-cry:

*I will not die an unlived life
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.*

Dawna Markova

