

Getting out of Our Trenches to Meet in No-Man's Land

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Abstract

The penetration of the culture wars into the church on both sides of the Atlantic is a deeply worrying trend. The two polar extremes are pulling hard, and in opposing directions, with a huge breakdown in trust, respect, and courtesy. People are being hurt or becoming disillusioned, and the name of God is not glorified. How can we rebuild trust and unity in this climate? In this article, I offer three biblical tools: self-criticism, from Amos; the concept of no-man's land, developed from the Joshua narrative; and compassionate listening, from Job. The article then considers, as a worked example, how these virtues might operate with regard to one particular shibboleth of our time: Critical Race Theory.

Keywords

Cultural analysis; Critical Race Theory; political polarisation; Old Testament/Hebrew Bible; ecumenism; peacemaking

Introduction

Although it appears to date back to the nineteenth century, use of the term 'culture wars' experienced a sharp up-tick in frequency in the late 1980s.¹ This reflects a growing polarisation of thought and practice, perhaps beginning in the United States of America, but now certainly including much of Europe, too.

Between May 2020 and May 2021, the United States experienced two defining moments, which together exemplify this dangerous polarisation of political and social ideology. The first was the public murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, along with the Black Lives Matter protests which ensued and the subsequent conviction of Derek Chauvin for his murder. The second was the storming of the Capitol

¹ This can be demonstrated, within digitised published media, by inserting the term 'culture wars' into the Google Books N-Gram tool.

building on 6 January 2021 by a largely White crowd protesting the ‘stolen’ election and parading QAnon propaganda.

Within Europe, cultural divisions tend to be geographically linked, with one recent commentator rather facetiously referring to ‘the contrast between the attitudes of the Western pansexual glitterati and the Intermarium’s good old boys and girls’.² However, neither East nor West Europe exhibits homogeneous cultural opinion.

The church is not immune from these trends. The polarisation in US society, with what is often characterised as ‘woke liberals’ on one side and ‘gun-toting nationalists’ on the other, is also seen within the American church. Within Europe, too, the political and cultural polarisation increasingly finds expression within the church.

At the risk of over-simplifying a complex matrix, we might make the following generalisation. Within the Western church (by which I mean North America, the United Kingdom, and mainland Europe), two narratives are competing for primacy. We will term them ‘Conservative’ and ‘Progressive’. Conservatism — used in this specific sense — takes a literalist or fundamentalist view of the Bible, prioritises the ethical issues of foetal rights and traditional human sexual expression, holds firmly to the value of freedom of religion, is strongly patriotic, and looks back with nostalgia towards its nation’s ‘Christian’ past. The alternative, Progressive narrative prioritises care for the marginalised and vulnerable, personal freedom, and fairness. This narrative’s use of the Bible focuses more on places where the Scripture supports themes of justice and is likely to be less literalist. Conservatives are more likely to be pro-gun (where relevant) or in favour of national military action, while Progressivism includes pacifist movements. Conservatives stress ‘family values’, often with an emphasis on traditional gender roles. Progressives tend to be pro-feminist and pro-LGBTQ. Many who characterise themselves as Conservatives would align with right-wing political parties, and they are generally white; those on the Progressive side are more likely to represent a broader range of ethnicities and tend to cast their votes left of centre. Conservatives may align with politicians

² Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, ‘Culture Wars in the EU’, Institute of World Politics blog <<https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2021/07/23/culture-wars-in-the-eu/>> [accessed 9 Jan 2023].

who promote tight controls on immigration, sometimes coupled with racist rhetoric (in the US, this may be anti-Latino; in Europe, it is more likely to be Islamophobic); Progressives may be receptive to more open immigration policies.

On each side of the divide, there are certain ‘shibboleths’; matters which operate as a test of orthodoxy. These include, but are not limited to: a cluster of questions around human sexuality and gender identity; perspectives on race and racism, including the applicability of Critical Race Theory; gender roles in the church; and the relationship of the church with government and power.

This penetration of the culture wars into the church is proving extremely damaging. The two polar extremes are pulling hard, and in opposing directions. There is a huge breakdown in trust, respect, and courtesy. Both sides vent their spleen publicly on social media, which only serves to intensify the division further. This is amplified by the effects of echo-chambers, which operate not simply within social media platforms and through selective reporting by news networks, but are also deeply intensified by theological and even educational silos. In the meantime, people become hurt or disillusioned, and the name of God is not glorified.

How can we rebuild trust and unity in this climate? In this article, I will offer three biblical tools, and then consider, as a test case, how they might operate with regard to one particular shibboleth of our time.

Three Biblical Tools

Amos: Self-Criticism

Behind the written words of the prophets are oracles which were probably first delivered performatively. A case in point is offered by the ‘Oracles Against the Nations’, contained in Amos 1–2. There is no consensus on the historical reality of their utterance, but here is one suggestion, offered by Hayim Tawil.

The prophet faces his audience, thunderously opens with v. 2 which paints God’s appearance as a roaring lion, thus manifesting Himself by means of lightnings and thunders [...] The prophet then turns and faces the northeast

raising his hand towards Damascus and prophecies against Aram (Amos i 3-5). While his hand is still raised upward he turns halfway slowly lowering his hand towards the southwest, pointing to Gazah, the most southern city of Philistia and enumerates its transgressions (Amos i 2-8).³

In Tawil's imagined reconstruction of the prophet's delivery, much is made of the geographical position of the nations in relation to his presumed position in Samaria. As he speaks each oracle, Amos flings his arms from one side to the other, describing a great cross, which is the form of the final letter of the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet: 'Amos clearly draws the letter Taw = X marking the effacement of the eight nations from the face of the map, i.e. the earth.'⁴

Imagining this great flourish helps us to focus on the rhetorical effect of the oracles. Amos, a prophet from the southern nation (Judah), has been called by God to prophesy in the northern nation (Israel). We obtain a glimpse of how this ministry was received in the words of Amaziah, prophet of Bethel:

Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel.' (Amos 7:12-13)⁵

We might therefore imagine the satisfaction experienced by the people of Israel as they hear the six pagan nations receiving messages of condemnation, one by one. And then the prophet draws breath and delivers a seventh oracle — against Judah! One might imagine their surprise and, perhaps, their *Schadenfreude*. Seven is the number of completeness; this is the climax of the prophetic judgement.

But unexpectedly, Amos has not finished. Drawing breath once again, he now denounces Israel, with the longest and most detailed condemnation of all. The self-satisfaction of his listeners must have quickly evaporated, as they are caught in his 'rhetoric of entrapment'⁶ and find themselves judged for their manifold abuses. Amos thus stands

³ Hayim Tawil, 'Amos' Oracles against the Nations: A New Interpretation,' *Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World* (1996), pp. 388-375 (pp. 375-376).

⁴ Tawil, 'Amos' Oracles against the Nations', p. 376.

⁵ Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁶ The phrase is R. Danny Carroll's, although Carroll argues that, given its written form, the opening verses of the book remove any surprise when the prophet turns upon the home nations (R. D. M. Carroll, *The Book of Amos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), p. 138).

in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who, unlike the prophets of the other nations, exercise *self-criticism*; that is, they bring God's word of rebuke, warning, and judgement against their own kings, priests, and people.⁷

In her book *Learning from the Germans*, Susan Nieman examines the way that Germany has sought to come to terms with its troubled past, and she seeks to apply this question to the issue of the legacy of slavery in the American South. Through her research, Nieman identifies that self-criticism is vital to the process of healing in a society that has been fractured by great moral injury.⁸

The church, too, must face up to some of the harms it has committed or permitted in the name of Christ; and not all of these harms are buried in the mists of history.⁹ Honesty about our errors and refusing the temptation to attempt to conceal or whitewash them is an important step in the self-criticism which will build bridges across the cultural divide.

But considering Amos as a prophet who exemplifies the self-criticism of biblical Israel also makes us aware of the complexities of who is 'self'. Because both Israel and Judah constitute the covenant people of God, in one sense Amos is practising self-criticism when he addresses either nation. The ready movement of the prophets between the two nations seems to presuppose such a perspective. But in another sense, as suggested above, Amos might have been viewed as practising 'self'-criticism when he condemned Judah, but 'non-self'-criticism when speaking to Israel. Now, as then, God's highest standards are applied to

⁷ For a comparison between Old Testament prophesy and the customary prophesy of the nations around, see John Walton, *Ancient near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), pp. 40–44.

⁸ Susan Nieman, *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 372.

⁹ As one example among many, see the highly critical report on the handling of sexual abuse allegations by the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee. Guidepost Solutions, 'The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee', 15 May 2022 <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6108172d83d55d3c9db4dd67/t/628a9326312a4216a3c0679d/1653248810253/Guidepost+Solutions+Independent+Investigation+Report.pdf>> [accessed 17 Jan 2023].

his covenant people,¹⁰ and as church we need to take responsibility for our own sin before we seek to address wider society about their sins. But, again, who is ‘self? Does a Baptist criticising a Catholic constitute *self*-criticism? Does a Progressive criticising a Conservative — or vice versa?

It seems to me that ‘self-criticism must take place in ever-narrowing, ever-intensifying circles. We might, indeed, have a valid critique to offer towards practice outside our own tradition or cultural circle. But a more focused version of self-criticism must be applied to our own contexts. And, within that, we must apply the highest standard to our own little clique, and then within that, to ourselves. Pre-eminently, we must attend to the logs in our own eyes (Matt 7:1–5).

Of course, self-criticism is futile unless it leads to change. In view of the egregiously divisive polemics that the church has permitted and condoned in recent years, people on both sides of the divide need to be willing both to learn and grow, and to admit it publicly.

There are at least three significant barriers to the sort of change that is needed. The first is the deep entrenchment of personal opinion, reinforced by theological silos and echo-chambers, as mentioned above. Change of opinion generally takes place through exposure to the ideas and experiences of others, and through mental flexibility and psychological openness. Herein lies the importance of listening well, which we will consider below.

The second barrier is an extension of the first, and arises from the power of the group, where entrenched collective attitudes become normative; in the language of Christian theology, they become doctrine or dogma. This is a form of tribalism, where the identity of individuals is closely tied up with the group and its normative patterns of behaviour and belief.

There tends to be a disproportionate focus on both sides of the gulf upon the issues that divide rather than upon the core gospel values. Conservatives may speak disproportionately about gender roles in the

¹⁰ See, for example, Luke 12:48 and 1 Peter 4:17.

church and the home.¹¹ Progressives often focus heavily upon ‘inclusion’ as a gospel value, which is often focused closely upon the inclusion of LGBTQs.¹²

To use the language of Gavin Ortlund, we need to learn to exercise ‘theological triage’. Ortlund urges that we distinguish between first-rank doctrines, which are essential to the gospel; second-rank, which are urgent for the church; third-rank, which are important to Christian theology; and fourth-rank which are indifferent.¹³ He proposes four criteria to enable the wise allocation of doctrines within this category.

1. How clear is *the Bible* on this doctrine?
2. What is this doctrine’s importance to *the gospel*?
3. What is the testimony of the *historical church* concerning this doctrine?
4. What is this doctrine’s effect upon the *church today*?¹⁴

Gracious and thoughtful interrogation of one’s inherited and absorbed beliefs, which are sometimes assumed without critical challenge, should facilitate self-criticism and growth.

The third barrier, which arises as a consequence of the first two, is the role of public shame, particularly where the cult of the strong leader is operative. A public climb-down by such a leader can mean loss of their personal reputation, as well as jeopardising their salary or stipend which is often dependent upon the favour of congregants. Similarly, for individuals, deviating from the group norm (whether that group is a local church community or an online community) can result in marginalisation, ostracisation, or even excommunication.

A fundamental Christian principle is that it is not possible to be truly converted unless one acknowledges one’s own guilt before God. Likewise, we all believe in a God whose wisdom and knowledge

¹¹ See, for example, the analysis of Mark Driscoll’s preaching in Jennifer McKinney, *Making Christianity Manly Again: Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, and American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹² This is an empirical observation; I am unable to identify any research which establishes this formally. It would be a fruitful topic for research.

¹³ Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), p. 47.

¹⁴ Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, p. 79. Emphasis original.

infinitely exceeds human capacity. In principle, then, humility ought to be a cardinal Christian virtue. The knowledge of our own finitude, and of our own moral failures, should be a defining paradigm which shapes all Christian relationships. This leads us into a consideration of the virtue of listening.

Job: Compassionate Listening

We encounter a biblical lesson about this virtue in the book of Job. Job, afflicted for no fault of his own, finds himself visited by three friends who have the worthy initial intention of offering comfort (2:11). But their silent compassion soon gives way to the determined and dogmatic repetition of standard theological tropes. This is partly because they lack the humility to imagine that their theology does not amount to a complete system, something that becomes clear at the end of the book, when God says to them, ‘you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has’ (42:7). Humility involves a willingness to entertain the possibility that we are wrong, or at least inadequate in our theological understanding. This is not the same thing as lacking firm convictions, but it implies a willingness to learn and grow — a willingness to listen to alternative viewpoints.

Further, Job’s friends also lack the compassion to comprehend that their arguments, however ‘right’, are not sensitive to the needs of the man suffering before them. They do not listen to his pain.

Most pastors understand the need to tailor their words to the present needs of the person before them. The whole of one’s theological system need not be brought to bear at any particular moment, and even the most firmly-held convictions can be offered with gentleness. But such pastoral sensitivity is sometimes lacking on the larger stage. The urge to be theologically ‘correct’ may play out in the minimisation of the suffering of another. Thaddeus J. Williams writes,

The easy response is to roll our eyes and chalk others’ experiences up to snowflakery or a Marxist conspiracy. Eye-rolling comes particularly easy to us if we have no personal experience of being mistreated because of our skin, sex or status. We must fight the temptation to take that easy road.¹⁵

¹⁵ Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2020), p. 140.

Those who do not suffer may possess power superiority in relationships with those who do, a power which must not be overlooked. We do not have to allow ‘lived experience’ to trump all other concerns in order to acknowledge its validity. To take an example from the debate around the legitimate expressions of human sexuality, it is possible to express a conservative stance with either aggression or sensitivity, with attention to the grief experienced by many same-sex attracted people, or with complete indifference to it. An exemplary — in my opinion — pairing of deep conviction and equally deep compassion is demonstrated by Brad Harper, the evangelical pastor who co-wrote a book with his gay son, Drew.¹⁶

In addition, a commitment to listening will also entertain the possibility of finding good in the other; it will seek the good intention, and honour what is honourable, even when differences remain. Even opinions that we consider egregious can originate in a laudable moral impulse. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued that we have five ‘moral tastes’ whose conflicting pulls we have to balance when coming to ethical decisions.¹⁷ People on the political right and left tend to have different priorities as they balance those factors. A listening stance will seek the virtuous impulse in the other, acknowledging that good people might hold opinions that differ from our own.

From the book of Job, we learn the value of listening well and with emotional sensitivity. This will help prevent us from overlooking the pain of others. It will also cause us to refuse to claim for oneself a monopoly of good intention. It will make us seek to understand the underlying causes of the other’s opinions and actions and be open to the possibility that those causes have merit, even if disagreements persist.

And how are we to conduct our dialogues, as our disagreements persist? This brings us to the third biblical tool that I propose.

¹⁶ Brad Harper and Drew Harper, *Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and His Gay Son* (Portland, OR: Zeal Books, 2016).

¹⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 131–179. Haidt’s ‘tastes’ are those of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

Joshua: Standing in No-Man's Land

The book of Joshua has a little-recognised key moment, which occurs just before the battle of Jericho.

Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?' (Josh 4:13)

This is a turning point because in the narrative of the Pentateuch up to that moment, Joshua has had little reason to doubt that God is on his side. Apart from the time that God explicitly forbade the people from going to battle (Num 14:40–45), Israel has never lost a military confrontation up to this point. Moreover, he has seen God intervene powerfully on many occasions: bringing the people out of Egypt and making covenant with the people at Sinai, with these words 'if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples' (Exod 19:15).

Therefore, if Joshua had known the identity of the man with the drawn sword, it is unlikely he would have asked the question that he did. But we, the readers, should be as astonished as he was when the man's identity is revealed, and he speaks these words.

He replied, 'Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.' (Josh 5:14)

This radical idea that God is not unconditionally on Israel's side is the lens through which we should read the remainder of the book. We note that although Joshua's army decisively wins the battle of Jericho, the battle of Ai which follows immediately afterwards is a punishing defeat for Israel. Victory, we are to understand, can never be guaranteed. It is always contingent upon the divine will. And God is free. Indeed, the very heart of the self-revelation of God on Sinai contains an expression of that freedom — a dangerous freedom: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live".' (Exod 33:19–20)

In response to the revelation by the commander of the Lord's army, Joshua prostrates himself:

And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, ‘What do you command your servant, my lord?’ The commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Remove the sandal from your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.’ And Joshua did so. (Josh 5:14–15, NRSV translation altered)

New light has recently been shed upon the significance of Joshua removing his sandal in this text. Despite most English translations rendering it in the plural (‘remove your sandals from your feet’), in the Masoretic Text, Joshua is actually instructed to remove his sandal from his foot (both singular).¹⁸ Allen Hamlin Jr has argued that this action bears less connection with the burning bush than is normally claimed, but, rather, it should be linked with the kinsman redeemer’s abrogation of his entitlements in Ruth 4:7–8, an action which appears to be based in the symbolic function of shoes to connote power and privilege. Joshua is, thus, relinquishing his claim to the land. Hamlin states succinctly, ‘In the removal of a sandal, [Joshua] releases and transfers any claim to possession as a result of his forthcoming conquests.’¹⁹

What this means is that Joshua is, quite literally, standing in ‘no-man’s land’. The land is the Lord’s, and will continue to be the Lord’s even when he grants battle victories and tenancy to his people.²⁰

Joshua’s conversation with the Lord’s commander provides a helpful model as we consider our engagement in the ‘culture wars’ of today. It is all too easy for Christians on both sides to believe that God is on their side. Many worship songs make this claim and such ideas may be uncritically assumed in the church.²¹ But — to repeat the point —

¹⁸ The LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate have the plural, which may represent an attempt to smooth out a difficult text.

¹⁹ Allen Hamlin, Jr, ‘Holy, Place, Stand, Sandal: Rethinking the Divine Commissioning of Josh 5:13-15’, paper presented at the Postgraduate Research Conference of Trinity College Bristol and Bristol Baptist College, June 2022.

²⁰ See, for example, Leviticus 25:23.

²¹ See the discussion in Carolyn Whitnall, ‘In the Presence of Whose Enemies?: A Discourse Analysis of a Popular Christian Song in the Context of a “Worship Protest”’, *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence*, 1 (2022), 6–42.

God is free and unrestricted to side with either party exclusively, a feature that we discover again and again in the biblical narrative.²²

The idea of ‘no-man’s land’ may also provide a model for productive dialogue. Just as warring parties tend to meet for parley in neutral territory, so the concept of a place which belongs to no human serves as a reminder that we are always on holy ground. In the ancient theological scheme, the land of Canaan was holy space, akin to the Temple itself — a theme which maps through to the church. *We* are God’s holy place. No entitlements or claims carry any weight here. In the same way that the servant whose debt had been cleared lost his entitlement for debt reclamation (Matt 18:23–35), so we must lay down all claims to privilege, grudge, or the higher moral ground. Michael Gorman has shown that the pattern of the cross, as set out in Philippians 2:6–8, forms the theological grammar for a cruciform shape to the lives of Christian disciples.

In these verses we find (1) a pattern of voluntary renunciation rather than exploitation of status [...] Although [*status*], not [*selfishness*] but [*self-abasement/slavery*].²³

We have briefly considered three biblical tools to help us find proposed ways forward in the culture wars. To summarise, these proposals are as follows:

- Self-criticism is a virtue, and must intensify as we get closer to ‘home’.
- We must acknowledge our limitations and seek the virtue in the ‘other’.
- Theological correctness does not remove the need for compassionate listening.
- No side can claim the unequivocal support of God.

²² See the discussion in Tremper Longman III, ‘Warfare’, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. by T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 835–839 (p. 838).

²³ Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 167.

- We operate in a space that belongs to God alone, where all entitlements must be relinquished.

We will now attempt to apply these to a worked example.

Worked Example: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT in Outline

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement is both an academic and an activist movement which seeks to determine and challenge intersecting structures of race and power.²⁴ It has its foundations in postmodern theories such as those of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, as well as earlier thinkers such as Marx. The movement emerged from the American Civil Rights movement but has developed substantially in more recent decades, including the diversification to encompass other ethnic populations and marginalised groups. Critical *Race* Theory can thus be considered a sub-branch of Critical Theory, an umbrella term that embraces a variety of issues sharing broadly similar methodologies and theoretical underpinnings.

CRT states that ‘racism is ordinary, not aberrational’²⁵ in society, meaning that it tends to be unseen by those whom the structure privileges, particularly whites. Rennie Eddo-Lodge writes of the built-in privilege structure:

Neutral is white. The default is white. Because we are born into an already written script that tells us what to expect from strangers due to their skin colour, accents and social status, the whole of humanity is coded as white. Blackness, however, is considered the ‘other’ and therefore to be suspected. Those who are coded as a threat in our collective representation of humanity are not white.²⁶

CRT argues that racist systems serve important purposes for the dominant group, which therefore form a powerful disincentive to change, with Robin DiAngelo arguing,

²⁴ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 3.

²⁵ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, p. 8.

²⁶ Rennie Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 30.

White fragility may be conceptualized as a response or ‘condition’ produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of whiteness. When disequilibrium occurs — when there is an interruption to that which is familiar and taken for granted — white fragility restores equilibrium and returns the capital ‘lost’ via the challenge. This capital includes self-image, control, and white solidarity. Anger towards the trigger, shutting down and/or tuning out, indulgence in emotional incapacitation such as guilt or ‘hurt feelings,’ exiting, or a combination of these responses results [...] [T]hese strategies are reflexive and seldom conscious, but that does not make them benign.²⁷

CRT considers race itself to be a social construct, not an ontological category based upon genetics.²⁸ Thus racial categories were ‘invented’ by those who sought to instrumentalise the bodies of others, particularly in the colonial and human trafficking projects. But saying that race is a socially constructed category ‘is not to say that the category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people [...] is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.’²⁹

CRT as a movement developed both within and without the church. A great voice of Black Liberation Theology (one of the forerunners of the more contemporary CRT movement) is James Cone. Cone urges the contextualisation of the gospel into Black experiences, arguing for its bankruptcy in the absence of such integration:

What are we to make of a tradition that investigated the meaning of Jesus’ relation to God and the divine and human natures in his person, but failed to relate these christological issues to the liberation of the slave and the poor in the society? [...] In the absence of the theme of freedom or the liberation of the slave, did the Church lose the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ?³⁰

²⁷ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to talk about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), pp. 105–106.

²⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, pp. 8–9.

²⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color’, *Stanford Law Review*, 43, no. 6 (July 1991), pp. 1241–1299 (p. 1296).

³⁰ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), p. 104.

A contemporary Black theologian whose voice is influential is Jemar Tisby. Tisby rejects some of the more extreme forms of CRT³¹ but is unafraid to call the American church to account for what he describes as its adaptive racism:

Racism never goes away; it just adapts. [From the mid twentieth century] many politically and theologically conservative Christians strayed away from the use of explicitly race-based language and appeals. Yet those appeals did not disappear. Instead they mobilised around the issue of taxation of private Christian schools, many of which remained racially segregated or made only token efforts at integration. They supported presidents and legal policies that disproportionately and negatively impacted black people. They accepted a color-blind rhetoric that still utilized racially coded messages [...] Simply by allowing the political system to work as it was designed — to grant advantages to white people and to put people of color at various disadvantages — many well-meaning Christians were complicit in racism.³²

Critiques of CRT

CRT has been critiqued on methodological grounds. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, for example, criticise it for being reductionist, pessimistic, and inflammatory, part of a methodology which is unfalsifiable, and ultimately working against the liberal human rights project.³³

CRT has also received stringent theological critique in conservative Christian circles. Conservative theological objections to CRT centre on a number of issues. It is argued that CRT theorists view 'sin' largely through the lens of collective White-on-Black oppression, rather than regarding such oppression as part of a wider understanding of the human predicament.³⁴ This arises from a totalising (and false) metanarrative, which views racism as the 'original sin', and offers a false

³¹ See his statement, given in relation to a dispute which well exemplifies some of the polarisation which this article is attempting to address. Jemar Tisby, 'Racial Compromise and Complicity at Grove City College', Footnotes by Jemar Tisby: <https://open.substack.com/pub/jemartisby/p/racial-compromise-and-complicity?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email> [accessed 17 April 2023].

³² Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), p. 171.

³³ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Universities Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (London: Swift, 2020).

³⁴ Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth*, p. 49.

gospel of anti-racism rather than redemption. Critiques like this arise from, for example, statements like this from James Cone.

When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God's gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land. But it must be made absolutely clear that it is the black community that decides both the authenticity of white conversion and also the part these converts will play in the black struggle of freedom. The converts can have nothing to say about the validity of their conversion experience or what is best for the community or their place in it, except as permitted by the oppressed community itself.³⁵

It could be noted that Cone's position is rather more nuanced than this rather polemical statement would suggest.

Further theological objections to the sort of world view proposed under the Critical Theory umbrella relate to the epistemological prioritisation of experience over objective truth,³⁶ and the binary division of the world whereby evil is wholly located within the 'other' or, for those grappling with historic guilt, within the 'self'. Christopher Watkin comments, 'There is a fault line between good and evil, but it does not run [...] between different social groups. It runs down the middle of them.'³⁷

CRT as a Shibboleth

CRT has proved to be extremely polarising in our churches — or has highlighted the polarisation that was already present. Some have welcomed it, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, considering it a useful tool to help us grow in our affirmation of all peoples. Kelly Hamren, for example, says, 'While CRT fails to recognize the root cause of racism (human sin), critical race theorists have done a good job paying attention to the ways in which racism manifests itself in Western societies.'³⁸

³⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 222.

³⁶ See, for example, the critique offered in Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), pp. 158–159.

³⁷ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), pp. 122–123.

³⁸ Kelly Hamren, 'Unpacking Critical Race Theory (CRT) for Christians: Toward a Better Theology of Race', Blog post for Power to Change Students, 16 February 2021

Others have called it a ‘cancer’ that needs to be ‘cut out’, because it is ‘lethal’ to the gospel.³⁹ In 2020, the presidents of the six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement that ‘affirmation of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality and any version of Critical Theory is incompatible with the Baptist Faith & Message’.⁴⁰ It cannot, therefore, be taught within any of the seminaries. And criticisms of CRT may go well beyond a careful theological engagement with the theory. For instance, some racial justice advocates have found ‘CRT’ to be a label that has been pejoratively applied to them for their work, even when it is not methodologically founded on CRT.⁴¹ Such oversimplification of others’ arguments is a common feature of the more polemical versions of the debate on both sides.

So how might the biblical tools we identified above be brought to bear upon this polarisation? I cannot deny a certain anxiety about writing on this subject, as a white woman. But I write as someone who does not wholly align with either the Conservative or the Progressive viewpoint (as these terms have been used above). And I write as a Christian minister and theological educator — positions which entail a responsibility to the church — who loves the church and is grieved by its divisions. My fear of being misunderstood or told that my voice is irrelevant must not trump the need for moderate voices to speak out. My suggestions do not seek to close down conversation and debate, but to open it up. We must all work for peace in every way we can.

<https://p2c.com/students/articles/unpacking-critical-race-theory-crt-for-christians-toward-a-better-theology-of-race/?fbclid=IwAR300VIHj8ZztE-bOz8eA0g3bUszBOviT9K3d6cM2kqAyyHAB9D9VmQRmoBk> [accessed 17 April 2023].

³⁹ ‘Critical Race Theory and the Southern Baptist Convention’, Christ Reformed Baptist Fellowship <<https://crbf.us/sermon-and-bible-study-videos/crt-and-the-sbc>> [accessed 11 April 2023].

⁴⁰ The statement can be found at the Baptist press website: George Schroeder, ‘Seminary presidents reaffirm BFM, Declare CRT Incompatible’: <<https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/seminary-presidents-reaffirm-bfm-declare-crt-incompatible/>> [accessed 17 April 2023].

⁴¹ The point was made by Jemar Tisby in the podcast, ‘Episode 209/Critical Race Theory with Jemar Tisby & Dr Christina Edmondson’, Be the Bridge <<https://bethebridge.com/episode-9-critical-race-theory-with-jemar-tisby-dr-christina-edmondson/>> [accessed 17 April 2023].

CRT and Self-criticism

What does the tool of self-criticism have to say to this problem? As it is an imperative for every disciple of Jesus Christ, it is a virtue that should be practised on both sides of the divide. We should all look self-critically at the ways that our actions (whatever the merit of our intentions) may cause harm to others. We also need to be willing to be self-critical of the harms that our traditions might have caused.

Those who advocate for CRT often call for self-criticism from those who have not wholly embraced its conclusions. But, as we have seen, self-criticism should be most potent in our closest circles. As Thaddeus Williams points out, ‘God’s solidarity with the poor and oppressed in Scripture never means that he elevates their perspective to sacred, unquestionable status.’⁴² Proponents of CRT might consider whether their assumptions about others are always founded upon evidence, or whether they fall into the temptation of essentialising the ‘other’.

Those who oppose CRT are quite possibly well-aware of the call to repent of the collective and often historical sins of their traditions. But rather than respond defensively, they might reflect humbly on what they as individuals and their traditions need to change. The vigorous protest sometimes offered against the notion of collective guilt needs to be set against the clear moments in Scripture where a whole people group are held collectively responsible for sin. Amos’s oracles are a good example.

CRT and Compassionate Listening

One of the fault-lines between CRT-based theologies and what we might term ‘traditional’ theological approaches is CRT’s appeal to personal experience. I share with traditionalists the concern that experience should not become the epistemological gold standard; it is not the ultimate and finally determinative way of ‘knowing’. But we are not brains in vats; we are embodied beings, and that embodiment matters. The incarnation brings the Word who is Truth into *being*, in

⁴² Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth*, p. 157.

flesh and blood; we eat and drink bread and wine to reify our connection with that living Word.

As we saw, Job's three friends 'knew' what was 'true'; their theology is broadly in line with much of the theology of the Old Testament. But that did not negate or nullify Job's experience, which is expressed in the most deeply empathetic terms for many chapters. When God appears in the whirlwind towards the end of the book, both Job and his friends are silent. Ultimately, both traditionalists and CRT theorists, in order to be biblically faithful, must heed the strengths of the other approach, acknowledge the limitations of their own, and submit to that which cannot be deduced or experienced but only encountered by divine revelation. And, as the whole of Scripture testifies, divine revelation does not neutralise human reason or nullify human experience, but engages with and transforms both at the deepest of levels.

Critical Theory seeks to expose and challenge power relationships. These power relationships often go entirely unnoticed by those who hold the power, who may feel indignant and hurt when they are 'accused' of holding privilege, when they have never intended such a thing.

While those who oppose CRT would challenge the underlying theoretical background to this approach (it leans heavily upon the work of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx, for instance), it would be unwise to disregard the challenge which it poses. If there *are* power dynamics that we fail to see because we are their beneficiaries, the way of Christian faithfulness must lead us to attend to them, just as the prophets cried out on behalf of those who were excluded from the power structures of their day: the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner. Humility and teachability would suggest that we have much to learn from those who would point out the ways that our conversations and public structures might exclude or privilege certain people.

Critical Theory is also commonly reproached for encouraging people to see themselves as victims. Sadly, however, the response by those who oppose this trend is often to deny the harms that lead people to position themselves in such a way. But denying that people are

victims will not make them feel less victimised. It is better to listen and learn.

A strength of CRT is this imperative to people in the dominant group to become aware of their own privilege. Privilege is often invisible to those who possess it, until they come into a real and compassionate encounter with those who lack it. Peggy McIntosh has compiled a list of fifty privileges which white people enjoy, often unconsciously, in what she terms the ‘invisible knapsack of white privilege’. They include the following observations:

If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.⁴³

Becoming aware of the privileges we possess need not make us feel guilty, but should make us more compassionate towards those who do not share them and should provoke us to identify and challenge structural injustice.

Along with compassion comes the willingness to listen and learn and the humility to admit the possibility of some virtue in the other side. Those on both sides of the divide might do well to consider the effect that theological echo-chambers, tribalism, and the fear of shame have upon the positions they publicly occupy. If we could foster a culture within our churches where growth and change are possible, even encouraged, we would be more likely to find common ground.

CRT and Relativisation of Claims (No-man’s Land) and of Identities

Another criticism commonly levelled against Critical Theory is the way that people are located within certain identities (Black, Queer, Cis, etc.) and the prioritising of that identity over their own individual identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes this as the ‘process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and

⁴³ Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* <<https://hd.ingham.org/Portals/HD/White%20Privilege%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2023].

individual', and argues that, for people in marginalised groups, this 'identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development'.⁴⁴ This approach stands in contrast with the rugged individualism which characterises modernity; a perspective which still persists today, particularly in the emphasis placed upon individual salvation by many churches.

Both of these stances contain theological truth, but neither of them is a complete theological system. At our baptism we enter the holy, catholic, and apostolic church; we are part of the Body of Christ, and our individualism has to be subordinated to the needs of that body — in all its diversity.⁴⁵ But all other identities that we claim, while not removed,⁴⁶ are now subordinated to our prime identity as children of God.

Once again, traditionalists and proponents of CRT need to learn from one another, while attending to the authoritative voice of God, as revealed in his Son and in Scripture, and while prioritising the needs and concerns of the marginalised.

Ultimately, neither group can claim that God is on their side. God refuses to be co-opted to any agenda which is less than the total renewal of the whole earth, victim and victimiser alike (Col 1:15–22). We all operate in 'no-man's land'; this is a place where no-one can drive in a stake and claim 'this is mine'. All claims are subordinated to God's, and all claims to being 'correct' are relativised in the light of God's truth. The church is not ours.

Towards Some Preliminary Conclusions

This article has offered three biblical tools for self-reflection and self-criticism, in an attempt to bring the polarised sides of the culture wars into productive and healing conversation. I conclude with some

⁴⁴ Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins', pp. 1241–1242.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Paul's discussion of the mutual responsibility of members in the body in 1 Corinthians 12.

⁴⁶ See Gal 3:28, for example.

questions which might prove pertinent as we consider our own positions regarding those with whom we disagree.

Questions to ask

- What are the power dynamics between us?
- What does the Other want to say to me?
- What pain does the Other carry?
- What can I learn from the Other? (Where am I wrong? Where is my theological system inadequate?)
- Where I disagree with the Other, what is the best construction I can place upon their motives?
- Where I disagree with the Other, what rank does this issue have in theological triage?
- When I meet the Other in no-man's land, what will we discover that we have in common?

Perhaps the place where we are most obviously in no-man's land is the Table of the Lord. As we come to break bread, we rediscover that we are guests, not proprietors. We come by invitation, not entitlement. We do not control the invitation list. Our past experiences do not make us more worthy, and our past sins do not prevent us, in God's grace. We cannot come unless we confess our sins with humble self-criticism. We eat and drink in memory of a broken body, and so we commit ourselves to attending to the still-broken Body of Christ.