

Critical Theory and the Gospel

Critical Theory is a philosophy, or school of philosophy which goes back to the early decades of the 20th century. The Critical Theorists were frustrated that by the 1920s the hoped-for revolution had not materialized. This talk suggests that Critical Theory is a kind of alternative religion—complete with its own view of creation or metaphysics, its own understanding of sin, and its own understanding of redemption and eschatology. Indeed, Critical Theory is best understood as a vision of the world which is parasitic on Christianity. The Christian faith provides the better understanding of God, man, and the world—an understanding that Critical Theory cannot produce from its own commitments and insights.

Bradley Green teaches theology at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. He earned an M.Div. at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Th.M. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. at Baylor University. He is the author of several books: *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Wipf and Stock); *The Gospel and the Mind: Recovering and Shaping the Intellectual Life* (Crossway); *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians* (IVP; editor and contributor); *Covenant and Commandment: Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the Christian Life* (New Studies in Biblical Theology, IVP); *Augustine of Hippo: His Life and Impact* (Christian Focus), as well as a volume in InterVarsity Press' Reformation Commentary on Scripture. He has also contributed essays and reviews to *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Chronicles*, *First Things*, *Touchstone*, and *The Churchman*. Brad and his wife Dianne have three children—Caleb, Daniel, and Victoria. Brad and Dianne also helped co-found Augustine School, a Christian liberal arts school in Jackson, Tennessee.

“All revolutions are doctrinal.”
G.K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*

I. What is “Critical Theory”

A. Introduction

1. General

- a. A political/social/intellectual group of persons
- b. Largely Jewish
- c. Frankfurt, Germany; the “Frankfurt School”
- d. Marxists, but frustrated Marxists

2. Key Persons (for our purposes)

- a. Theodor Adorno
- b. Max Horkheimer
- c. Walter Benjamin
- d. Herbert Marcuse

B. Options:

- A “worldview”?
- A philosophy?
- A political system/agenda?

In some sense all of these

For the purposes of this presentation . . .

Critical Theory will be analyzed as a kind of alternative theology or religious system.

Critical Theory will be analyzed as a kind of system, fundamentally religious, which is parasitic on Christianity

II. Understanding and Engaging Critical Theory

Thesis: Critical Theory can be viewed through the following three biblical-theological categories:

- (1) Creation and Reality
- (2) Sin and the Human Dilemma
- (3) Redemption, History, and Eschatology

Key Point: Christians must work hard to offer a distinctly *Christian* critique of Critical Theory.

III. Critical Theory Today?

While it is not always easy to draw an easy line from (1) the older Critical Theory to (2) contemporary challenges, it *is* the case that there is a striking conceptual similarity between the worldview and premises of Critical Theory and certain moral/social/cultural/ideological phenomena today.

- (1) Creation and Reality -----> Contemporary hyper race-consciousness
- (2) Sin and the Human Dilemma -----> Contemporary educational theory
- (3) Redemption, History, and Eschatology -----> Contemporary sexual revolution
- (4) A fourth theme—a test case: Hate Speech Laws
 - A very straight line from Herbert Marcuse (his essay, “Repressive Tolerance”), to contemporary “Hate Speech Laws”
 - Thesis: Anti “Hate Speech” laws can be seen as a confused and secularized form of anti-blaspemy laws.

IV. Conclusion

- Nothing new under the sun
- Engagement with Critical Theory affords Christians the opportunity to grasp the beauty and explanatory power of the Christian faith.
- Taking every thought captive

For Further Study:

Here is a very select list of suggested readings for further study.

A general list:

Bronner, Stephen. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

- A very good introduction by someone who quite clearly supports critical theory.

Green, Bradley G. "Critical Theory and the Gospel." *The American Reformer*. July 26, 2022. <https://americanreformer.org/2022/07/critical-theory-and-the-gospel/>

- My own initial attempt to offer a brief Christian engagement with Critical Theory. This essay has now been expanded, and is scheduled for publication with Crossway Publishers in March of 2026, under the title, *What is Critical Theory? A Concise Christian Analysis*.

Jeffries, Stuart. *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. London and New York: Verso Books, 2017.

- This is an excellent introduction to Critical Theory, and is built around the same four persons focused on in my book, *What is Critical Theory? A Concise Christian Analysis*.

Smith, Robert S. "Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?" *Themelios*. Volume 44, Issue 3. July 4, 2020.

- Professor Smith's essay is an excellent introduction to broader world of Critical Theory or Cultural Marxism.

Thompson, Peter. "The Frankfurt School." A 7-part series published at *The Guardian* between March 25 and May 17, 2013.

- A very helpful journalistic introduction (generally sympathetic) to the world of the Frankfurt School (or, Critical Theory).

Watkin, Christopher. *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022.

- A long and thorough introduction to Critical Theory. Professor Watkin does not really cover the Frankfurt School, but rather focuses on the broader stream of Critical Theory since the days of the Frankfurt School.

One book of essays of primary sources:

Bronner, Stephen Eric, and Douglas MacKay Kellner, edd. *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.

If one wants to grasp how Critical Theory is influencing culture today, by reading an advocate of Critical Theory, I would recommend reading Herbert Marcuse. Perhaps the best places to start:

Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966 [originally published in 1955].

Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970 (first published in 1965, pages 81-123).