

# CHRISTIANITY AND “WOKENESS”: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

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*In the last few years, large segments of both our culture and the church have been captivated by “antiracism,” “antisexism,” “intersectionality,” and “social justice.” But what exactly do these words mean? In this talk, I’ll sketch the core tenets of critical social justice and explain how they undermine basic Christian doctrines. Christians can and should work for biblical justice without adopting ideas that are fundamentally incompatible with Scripture.*

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## WHAT CAN WE DO?

### ACKNOWLEDGE AND FIGHT RACISM

... What can we do in response to the incursion of woke ideology into the church and into the culture?

Number one, we can acknowledge and fight racism. Many are attracted to woke ideology because it purports to offer a way to end racism, to provide justice, to lift up the marginalized. Christians rightly want to do that, so

when they hear these ideas they immediately gravitate toward them. If you, like me, are very concerned that people are embracing a false and dangerous worldview, then the worst thing you can do is to minimize or ignore racism.

Instead, we should offer an alternative way to seek racial unity. For us as educators, that starts with telling the true story of our nation’s horrific racial past. For example, about 3,400 blacks were lynched between 1880 and 1970, as well as about 1,300 whites. These stories are horrifying. The lynchings were public; people would come home from church and witness these spectacles like they were fun exhibits. People were burned alive, and their fingers passed out as trophies. Viewers sent postcards telling friends about the lynchings they had watched. Too often we think that our nation is different from all other nations. We’re not different. We’re full of sinners. We don’t have to tell people that our country is the worst country or the best country in the world. We can tell the truth, because as Christians our citizenship is not ultimately in the United States. Our citizenship

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is in heaven.

I'm not here to knock the United States. I love being an American. But we have to tell our children the true and the false, the ugly and the beautiful, and be honest about the reality of our history. Too often children have grown up reading a Bowdlerized, sanitized version of history. There were good guys, and there were bad guys, but the United States is portrayed as "always awesome." Then our kids get to college and hear the reality—we have really dark chapters in our past. Texts that are honest about this history then get treated as a divine oracle, and our kids get sucked into a new worldview. We can inoculate our kids by telling them the truth: we live in a very good and a very bad country. We can be honest. Segregation is within living memory, and has a lasting impact today. So fight and acknowledge racism.

## BE CHARITABLE

Second, be charitable. This is not for just men or just women or just whites or just blacks or Hispanics. The Bible speaks to all of us. All of us should be "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry." One way to do this is to listen to people's experiences. Ask someone who is different from you about their childhood, their

racial or ethnic background, their friends growing up. Listen for their perspective. Don't jump in and correct them. The goal is not to treat lived experience as infallible, but to listen before we critique. When you hear a friend talk about "privilege," don't jump down his throat or beat him over the head with a "Marxism hammer." Instead, ask questions: "I hear you talk about privilege—could you explain what you mean by that? Have you ever interacted with critiques of white privilege as a concept?" Do it slowly.

## RECOGNIZE THE BIBLICAL ISSUES AT STAKE

Third, recognize the biblical issues at stake. There are some significant biblical principles we must acknowledge and affirm, which must lead us to reject popular ideas in our culture.

1. *Our primary identity is in Christ, not in race, ethnicity, gender, or anything else.* Christ comes first in everything. In Galatians 3:26–28, there is neither male nor female, Jew or Greek, slave nor free—we are all one in Christ. But this does not mean that our other identities cease to exist. When Paul

said there is neither Jew nor Greek, he also said that there is neither male nor female. Are we now gender-blind? Can we not see whether someone is a man or a woman? No! Paul is saying that Christ unites us; we now have the same standing before God, but we're still men, we're still women. Paul was Jewish. He delighted in being Jewish, and grieved for his people. When people came and visited him who were Jewish Christians, he felt no compunction with identifying as a Jewish man. There is nothing wrong with having an ethnic identity, a male or female identity, a national identity. But Philippians 3 says I regard this as rubbish, dung, skubala (σκύβαλα) compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. Those identities are not erased, but are bound together under a greater identity.

2. *We can only repent of our own sins* (Ezek. 18:14–20, Deut. 24:16, and Jer. 31:27–34). Yes, we are all fallen in Adam, but he is our federal head, and when we become Christians, Christ is our new federal head. Someone living 300 years ago is not our federal head, and we cannot repent for sins we didn't commit. In the Bible, repentance, or metanoia (μετάνοια) means turning from sin. I change my mind, and I change my behavior as a result. I cannot turn from a sin or behavior that I already loathe, which I've never committed. We sin everyday, and should repent of that. But we dare not hold people accountable for the sins of their great-great-great grandfather. The Bible itself says that the son shall not die for his father's sin.
3. *No one's lived experience makes them infallible.* The culture says, "You shouldn't invalidate people's lived experience." But sometimes we must, because lived experience is not infallible. When we interpret our lived experience, our sinful flesh twists our experiences to benefit ourselves. Instead,

## PLENARY VIDEO: CHRISTIANITY AND WOKENESS

ACCS member schools may watch a video recording of Neil's plenary address by visiting the ACCS Member's Resource Center.

[https://mrc.classicalchristian.org/conference\\_media/christianity-and-wokeness-are-they-compatible-neil-shenvi/](https://mrc.classicalchristian.org/conference_media/christianity-and-wokeness-are-they-compatible-neil-shenvi/)

we must look at what Scripture says, and what objective evidence says. This does not mean we shut people down and refuse to hear their stories. No, you should listen to their stories, and tell them about your own experience. But at the end of the day, each of us must come before Scripture and submit our experiences to God's Word.

4. *Biblical justice means "giving people their due," not "dismantling hegemonic norms"* (Rom. 13:1–7, Is. 1:17). This means both giving the righteous the reward, and giving the wicked punishment. That's a key part of the gospel, because we are unrighteous, deserving God's just punishment, yet in Christ we receive the gift of his righteousness. We've received mercy, not justice. Dismantling "oppressive norms" haphazardly is extremely unwise, because some of those norms—categories like male and female—are God-given. They are not oppressive; they lead to human flourishing. Recognize that how you define justice is extremely important, and will have repercussions for everything you do. So define justice carefully, and biblically.
5. *Diversity is not always good* (Jdg. 21:25, Rev. 17:13–14). In the workplace, do we really want people with differing opinions on whether racism is a sin? Is that a good kind of diversity in the church?

No. There is one way to think of racism, and that's God's way. Certain beliefs are objective, and we do not want diversity of opinion on them. We cannot have one person in our church believing Jesus is God, and one person believing he is not God. Diversity of ethnicity or culture, however, is a good thing, because God has a diverse church of people all around the world who are brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a diversity we can celebrate.

6. Sixth, *the gospel is an indicative statement, not an imperative* (Rom. 4:5, John 6:29). The gospel is about what God did on your behalf, in Christ. It is not a command to go and earn God's approval. Too many people have said, "We want to do social justice, we care so much, we think it's part of the gospel." That is a deadly mistake. Social justice, whatever it is, is something you do. It may be good and noble, but it is not the gospel. The gospel is about what God has done on our behalf to rescue us, because we were helpless to do justice, to love mercy, to obey God's commands about moral purity, sexual purity. We are failures, and God rescued us in his great love and redeems us—that is the gospel.

## READ BROADLY

Finally, we should read broadly. People love diversity, and that's good—so I suggest getting books from a wide diversity of authors. Often when people say, "I read diverse authors," they sometimes mean "I read multi-colored authors." That's not what I mean. I mean that you should read ideologically diverse authors. For example, take Voddie Baucham. He requires his children to read *Mein Kampf*, *Origin of Species*, Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Greek mythology. He's not afraid to do that. He himself spends nearly as much time reading books with which he disagrees as those which affirm

his positions, and he is able to identify with and profit from both.

In *Mama Bear Apologetics*, Hilary Ferrer writes, "It's dangerous to separate the world into 'good, safe, Christian authors' and 'bad, evil, non-Christian authors.'" Why is this dangerous? What happens when a "good, safe, Christian author" says something false, or when a "bad, evil, non-Christian author" says something true? Don't let your kids be fooled by these categories; they can't deal with a mixture. You must teach them the ability to discern truth from error, and that requires you to expose them to some false ideas.

Reading broadly first forces you to read critically. If everything you read says the same thing, you don't have to ask yourself why it is true. It exposes your blind spots. If you read ideologically diverse authors, you will find yourself having your blind spots challenged; you will be pushed to reexamine your assumptions. Reading broadly also inoculates you against error. Kids should be exposed to the lies of the devil in a safe, controlled environment so that they build up an immune system that will protect them when they encounter these ideas in college, in the workplace, or on social media. Finally, reading broadly does not require agreement. We seek truth wherever we find it, and sometimes this will be from non-Christian authors. All truth is God's truth. He is the author of all truth, so when we find truth we can credit him regardless of the secondary resource from which it comes.

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Confronting Injustice Without Compromising Truth* by Thaddeus Williams
- *Beyond Racial Gridlock* by George Yancey
- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

Workshop talk slides: <https://shenviapologetics.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/christianityandwokeness.pdf>