

Woke Theology

We frequently hear the term “woke” in current discussions. Campuses, corporations, and even some churches are described as being woke. What does the term mean? How are these ideas influencing society? Is there any connection to ESG mandates and stakeholder capitalism? And how should Christians respond to the influence of wokeness?

Definition of the Term

The term means that one is “awake” to the true nature of the world at a time when so many in society are asleep. In his book on *Christianity and Wokeness*, Owen Strachan explains that “wokeness occurs when one embraces the system of thought called critical race theory. CRT teaches that all societal life is structured along racial power dynamics.”

According to this view, race is a “social construct,” not biologically based, and merely exists in our imagination. This is one place where there might be some agreement between wokeness and the Bible. The Bible teaches that we are “one race.” Some translations, for example, for Acts 17:26 refer to all humans as “one blood.” Another verse would be Galatians 3:28 which says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

I have found that woke theology often surfaces in the non-Christian world as a substitute religion. Woke theology also surfaces in some churches that are legitimately concerned about injustice. They want to be relevant to the cultural dialogue and thus adopt wokeness.

These terms are sometimes misused, which is why Strachan also devotes a section on explaining what wokeness is *not*. Here are just five statements of the fifteen he discusses:

- Wanting societal harmony across backgrounds does not make you woke.
- Seeing massive failings in American and Western history, sustained patterns of racist thought, does not make you woke.
- Doing everything you can and know to do to build bonds with people different from you in various ways does not make you woke.
- Praying for greater diversity in your church through saving of fellow sinners does not make you woke.
- Wanting greater justice in the world doesn't make you woke.

In this article we will be looking at various aspects of woke theology. What is the ideology? How does it relate to critical race theory? What about corporations that have adopted a woke ideology? And how can we as Christians respond to this current cultural trend?

Woke Ideology

Wokeness includes the ideas of critical race theory and antiracism but is broader than just these ideas about race and racial justice. It also includes other social, legal, and even environmental concerns. These ideas were first developed and promoted on university campuses but have made their way into government, corporations, and nearly every part of society.

It is most visible through the actions of people who call themselves "social justice warriors." Critics might describe them as "virtue-signaling liberals" or merely call them "the woke." Whatever name you give to these groups, they have been successful in influencing nearly every institution in America and much of the Western world.

They use inflamed rhetoric and what one commentator calls "*ex-cathedra* incantations of pseudo-values so absurd that only a

few years ago it would have seemed like they must be kidding.” That’s a fancy way of saying that you can’t believe people are completely serious when they are saying crazy things about race, gender, and science.

Much of this began on university campuses across the nation. Professors promoted ideas about cultural transformation that influenced the young minds who became the future opinion-forming elite of today. These ideas were reinforced because of a liberal media forming a feed-back loop between a leftist academy and a liberal establishment media.

This is an important principle to understand. In the past, we used to hear parents and others argue that the nutty ideas in the heads of college students would fade away as they had to earn a living and deal with the realities of the world of business. What happened was the fact that these college graduates found previous graduates in some of these corporations who were woke soul mates. The woke ideas on campus often became the foundational ideas in business and government. The media continued to reinforce those crazy woke ideas.

In her book, *Awake: Not Woke*, Noelle Mering explains how many in this emerging generation do not believe they are defined as being in the image of God but instead are called to fight evil in society. They are merely one entity in a group identity rather than someone made in the image and likeness of God. They aren’t praised or criticized by their actions and attitudes. Instead, they are elevated or condemned based on their group, their racial background, or their gender. They are not only being indoctrinated by critical theory on race but also by critical theory on sex and gender. And obedience to these ideas is achieved through thought and speech control.

Critical Race Theory

One aspect of wokeness is critical race theory. Critical

theory began at the University of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, which came to be known as the "Frankfurt School." The Frankfurt scholars fled to Columbia University's Teachers College in New York in 1934 to escape the Nazis.

Critical theory traces all social injustice to inequities in power that are based on class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. In classical Marxism, the focus was on class, with the assumption that the working class would rise up against the capitalist oppressors. By contrast, critical theory is a form of cultural Marxism that seeks a radical transformation of society by uprooting present social authorities. Cultural Marxism retains basic Marxist assumptions but advocated a "long march through the institutions," to quote a leading thinker, Antonio Gramsci.

You are either in power or out of power. If you are in power, you are automatically discredited. If you are underprivileged, you are immune from criticism. The underprivileged can make demands, but they need not make arguments, since the whole system, including basic rationality, is rigged against them. This also means that the claims of critical race theory are unfalsifiable.

At its core, critical race theory is impractical. James Lindsay asks you to imagine you own a small tailor shop where you must assist each customer individually. Two people enter your store: one is white, and the other is black. If you choose to serve the black person first, it shows you are racist because you don't trust a black person in the store unsupervised. If you choose to serve the white person first, it shows you are racist because you value white people over black people.

How should we respond to these claims? First, the Bible teaches that truth exists and can be discerned (Proverbs 30:5, John 8:32, 2 Timothy 3:16). Racial bias may be a problem, but the real impediment to proper biblical interpretation is our

sin (John 3:19-20). Proponents of the woke agenda reject rational arguments and censor contrary ideas about race and society.

Christians are to love God with our minds (Mark 12:30). We are to “destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God” because we are to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Second is the issue of grace. According to their view, members of an “oppressor” race will never really be forgiven because they will always be part of that race. By contrast, the Bible teaches that we are guilty because we are sinful (Romans 3:23, 6:23) not because of our racial status. We cannot earn salvation by good works because salvation is a gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are redeemed through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22-24).

Woke Corporations

Corporations that have gone woke have been increasingly involved in politics. Here are just a few examples from the last year.

When the Georgia legislature debated and then passed voter integrity laws, the CEOs of several corporations took to the media to express their displeasure. For example, the CEO of Coca-Cola complained the voting law was oppressive, which then brought attention to the fact that the company was doing business in China with oppressive human rights violations. The CEO of Delta Airlines complained about voter IDs as other critics were reminding them that you couldn’t get on a Delta flight without showing a form of ID. But if these Georgia laws were supposedly an attempt at voter suppression, they failed since the number of voters in the latest election set records.

Many of these companies seem to be reevaluating their past actions. They can see the downward financial trajectory of

past woke companies. The common phrase “get woke, go broke” seems to be true.

They also have noticed how members of Congress have responded. Senator Rick Scott wrote an open letter to “Woke Corporate America,” saying that he hoped they were having fun with their virtue signaling and the attempts to one-up each other. But he reminded them they destroyed working people’s jobs and destroyed some small businesses.

Although there are some members in Congress who want to pressure corporations to be less woke, there are other significant pressures on these companies to be more woke. This comes from the enforcing of ESG standards. The “E” stands for environmental concerns. What is the company doing to address the threat of climate change by lowering carbon emissions? The “S” stands for social and looks at the company’s relationship with stakeholders (often called stakeholder capitalism). The “G” stands for governance and desires diversity on the board of directors and corporate transparency.

While many of the ESG goals are admirable, recent examples show how it has been used as a political tool against anyone who dissents. A senior HSBC banker was canceled merely because he correctly observed that some of the climate change rhetoric was shrill and unsubstantiated.

Recently Tesla was removed from the S&P 500 ESG Index, even though they are the largest producer of electric cars and a few months ago had the fourth largest weighting in the index. Could it be that this change had more to do with the words and actions of Elon Musk than anything at Tesla?

How Should We Respond?

We are living in a time when we can be canceled for something we say or even for our lack of enthusiasm for a particular policy or piece of legislation. That is why Rod Dreher warns

us in his book, *Live Not by Lies*, of a coming “soft totalitarianism.” The old, hard totalitarianism came from the state (Germany, Russia) and was dedicated to the eradication of Christianity. This new totalitarianism usually comes from the Left in society but is also dedicated to the eradication of Christianity.

The soft totalitarianism of today demands allegiance to a set of progressive beliefs. Compliance is forced less by the state than by elites who form public opinion, and by private corporations that control our lives through technology. Citizens won't be taken away in handcuffs by the state, but their lives will be devastated by Leftist elites that will do what they can to destroy their lives.

Dissenters from the woke party line find their businesses, careers, and reputations destroyed. They are pushed out of the public square, stigmatized, canceled, and demonized as racists, sexists, and homophobes.

His book is full of stories from Christians who endured hard totalitarianism and provide us with models for how to address this more insidious form of soft totalitarianism. Often this is coming from business and the media.

What is a biblical perspective on race and gender? Christians and churches are facing persecution because many of these woke ideas are contrary to Scripture. Nevertheless, many of these woke ideas are making their way into the pulpits and Sunday School classes of many churches.

Woke religion rejects the salvation of Christ and supplants it with a utopian view that true salvation can be found in environmental activism, racial activism, and stakeholder capitalism. We can applaud young people looking to make the world a better place, but they have put their allegiance into a worldview contrary to biblical principles.

Woke faith at its core is atheistic and denies God and Christ.

Much of it is rooted in a Marxist view of the world. Second, it also replaces the biblical idea of sin (Romans 3:23) with salvation through environmental activism and racial struggle. Third, it is a utopian vision that assumes we can create “heaven on Earth” without Christ.

If we want to address real social problems in our society, we need to come back to biblical principles. Many of the successful social movements in the last two centuries (abolition, suffrage, civil rights) rested on a biblical foundation. We don’t need woke theology to bring salt and light to our fallen world.

Additional Reading

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical View on Wokeness*, Point of View booklet, 2022.

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical View on Critical Race Theory*, Point of View booklet, 2021.

Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, New York: Sentinel, 2020.

Noelle Mering, *Awake: Not Woke, A Christian Response to the Cult of Progressive Ideology*, Gastonia, NC: Tan Books, 2021.

Vivek Ramaswamy, *Woke, Inc.*, New York: Center Street, 2021.

Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement is Hijacking the Gospel and the Way to Stop It*, Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021.

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How Do We Respond to Calls to

Discuss Justice in the Church?

How do we respond to calls to discuss justice in the church? Not only is this a hot issue right now, but it is a critical issue to discuss. Because it is crucial, we need to address it in the church.

Approaching the Conversation

Primarily, we need to be intentional about how we approach the conversation (and yes it should be a conversation, not just one person teaching or giving a monologue). First, we need to be extra intrigued as to why others think differently than we do. We need to let them talk and accept their reactions as genuine. We need to stay away from rejecting what is being told by attributing a bad intention.

Second, we need to take note of whether we are processing the information as facts, filters, or identity^[1] on our part individually, but as well look to know where others are coming from and why. Our goal should always be understanding, not only of issues but also of other people's perspectives.

Third, we need to be interested and ask questions, *not to beat the other person but to seek reciprocal knowledge* regarding why we differ or where the disagreements and pressure points are.

Fourth, we need to learn reflective listening, to correctly rephrase what we hear others to be saying in the tricky moments in a manner that reassures the other person: "This is what I hear you saying. Did I get it right? Do I understand you correctly?" The importance at this point is that the other person gets to decide whether he/she is being understood. By engaging in these approaches, what is hopefully conveyed to

others is that the fundamental purpose of our discussion is to dialogue—to understand each other, not only find out who is correct.{2}

Defining Terms

As with almost any discussion today, I think it is necessary to define terms. This discussion especially calls for defining the term “justice” before we can even begin. For instance, when having this discussion are we saying merely “justice”, or the now popular term “social justice”, or a seemingly Christian claim to “biblical justice?” This alone takes up a good chunk of the discussion. Read how one popular journalist describes this dilemma: “I put on my prospector’s helmet and mined the literature for an agreed-upon definition of social justice. . . . What I found,” he bemoans, “was one deposit after another of fool’s gold. From labor unions to countless universities to gay rights groups to even the American Nazi Party, everyone insisted they were champions of social justice.”{3}

The word *justice* in Scripture means to prescribe the right way, {4} and the two key metaphors used in Scripture are level scales and an even path (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; Isaiah 1:16-17; Amos 5:21-25; Matthew 23:23). Now any variation of justice could refer to Christian attempts to eradicate human trafficking, help the inner-city needy, creating hospitals and orphanages, overturn racism, and safeguard the unborn. I propose we call this *biblical justice* and use a definition provided by pastor, speaker, and author Dr. Tony Evans: “The equitable and impartial application of the rule of God’s moral law in society.”{5} He arrives at this definition because God’s ways are just (Deuteronomy 32:4) and He is the supreme lawgiver (James 4:12), therefore His laws and judgments are just and righteous (Psalm 19:7-9; 111:7-8). Furthermore, they are to be applied with no partiality (Deuteronomy 1:17; Leviticus 19:15; Numbers 15:16).

What is social justice then? Recently, *social justice* has brought on an exceptionally charged political meaning. It turned into a brandishing poster for groups like Antifa, which finds physical aggression against persons who believe differently as both morally justified and tactically successful, and praises its underreported verbal beatings. Social justice is the brandishing poster for universities across the country where the “oppressor vs. oppressed” narrative of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Note: *Oppression* is a biblical term. The prophets precede these authors by millennia! The term or its presence in the world is not automatically in this area.), the deconstructionism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the gender and queer theory of Judith Butler have been inserted into the very definition of the term.[\[6\]](#)

As Evans summarizes,

Social justice has become a convoluted term meaning different things to different people. It is often used as a catchphrase for illegitimate forms of government that promote the redistribution of wealth as the collectivistic illegitimate expansion of civil government, which wrongly infringes on the jurisdictions of God’s other covenantal institutions (family and church).[\[7\]](#)

However biblical the roots of the term *social justice* are, it has been hijacked (still as some might criticize what is going on for other reasons). There is a concern labels can oversimplify matters and make binary classifications. Pitting “biblical justice” against “social justice” brands is making binary means of seeing ideas and dangers, creating a false dichotomy. Certainly, there are things that the “social justice” group is doing that is other than the biblical response to advocating justice. However, several of the concerns that they are raising are reasonable. One of the troubles is that they are recommending political solutions to problems that are beyond complicated and in the end need God’s

divine change of individual hearts. But labels can also clarify distinctions between various models. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I propose when we are discussing *justice*, we aim for the meaning of *biblical justice*. After clarifying and defining terms, we would want to check and make sure all interested parties are on the same page.

CRT

Now I we need to address Critical Race Theory (CRT) because I believe these ideas are a problem that infiltrate Christian thinking and the church. Legal scholar and law professor Richard Delgado defines CRT:

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. [\[8\]](#)

I think we can all agree racism is bad, and because CRT has been pushed to the forefront and claims to deal with the issue of racism, it has been extremely easy for Christians to adopt a terrible framework with good intentions. This needs to be corrected. Otherwise, it remains an elephant in the room especially for Neo-Fundamentalist Evangelicals and Mainstream Evangelicals (as defined by Michael Graham [here](#)).

As pastor and theologian Dr. Voddie Baucham points out, the movement has several qualities of a cult, including keeping

near enough to the Bible to prevent instant exposure and concealing the truth that it has a different theology and a novel lexicon that deviates from Christian orthodoxy. In traditional cult style, they steal from the common and acknowledged, then immerse it with different connotation. [\[9\]](#) The worst part about this theory is there is no final solution to the problem. CRT just offers an endless cycle of division and racism at worst. At best, it draws attention to the sin of racism.

There is much more that can be said on this, and I would suggest anyone who wants to explore this more read the books listed in my bibliography below. Most of them cover CRT in some fashion.

Does Focusing on Biblical Justice Get Us Off Mission?

I want to address the concern of whether focusing on biblical justice gets the church off mission. I think the mission of the church is to equip the saints and make disciples. That is a broad vision. The question is still whether focusing on biblical justice is part of that mission. If it is not already clear in the definition of the term above (even the name *biblical* justice supplies a hint to this answer), I would like to clearly and explicitly answer whether this is part of the mission of the church.

The responsibility of the church is to perform biblical justice for the poor, orphans, widows, foreigners, enemies, oppressed, hungry, homeless, and needy. Scripture concerns biblical justice particularly to these parties as a main matter; for it is these parties that best denote the powerless in the world and take the burden of injustices. The church is not to harm or ostracize the poor (James 2:15-16), or to have status and racial prejudice (Galatians 2:11-14). Instead, the church is appointed to take on the basic needs of the

disadvantaged. I would also point out (particularly for the Evangelical Christians) this does not mean promoting reckless handouts, which the Bible rigorously forbids (2 Thessalonians 3:10; Proverbs 6:9-11; 10:4; 13:18; 30-34).

Furthermore, Probe Ministries President Kerby Anderson made a marvelous point (to me over email) regarding Christians in the workforce: "ALL Christians are to be salt and light. But believers who are CALLED to positions related to justice (judges, lawyers, law enforcement, political leaders) are to use their gifts to promote justice. Not only is that not OFF MISSION, but it is exactly their mission in their job."

Ultimately, *doing justice* satisfies the two highest commandments granted to us by Jesus: to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). "Biblical justice is a foundational part of fulfilling the purpose of the church as intimated by the heart of God. It is a result of God's people becoming one through being what God has called us to be and participating in what He has called us to do—*justice*." [{10}](#)

Asians and Other Minorities

Usually, at least in our environment, the discussion about racial friction is likely a black/white discussion, although lately it has come to be obvious that this is not only a black-and-white discussion. Often, people of Asian background are not being addressed in any way. Now the COVID pandemic ignited some racial prejudice and hatred against Chinese individuals and other Asian individuals. What we are getting more in the news and social media is that for Asians, issues have shifted, and matters appear to be extremely different for them. So, you look at these events and, I believe for certain individuals, they are living with more concern since, whether they have faced that sort of prejudice, they are watching it being discussed in the news and on social media. So, for those that are reading this and even considering this for the first time, I want to point out what is truly a shortage of

emotional quotient in the sense we relate with each other. Jesus speaks, “treat people the same way you want them to treat you.” {11} One of the shifts of philosophy demands that we manage to stop seeing people through a lens of stereotypes that we have, and see the one we are relating with individually. I believe it is extremely useful to think about our longing to develop the proper sort of community in our church. The further we take part and understand the various types of life encounters and experiences that individuals have, the richer we will be as we communicate with individuals.

Recommendations for the Church

As Tony Evans says, “Theology must never be limited to esoteric biblical conclusions void of practical strategies for bringing God’s truth to life through our obedience and good works.” {12} The church needs to take the lead in creating unity through clearly showing it in our lives. What I would recommend the church does is follow this three-point plan: {13}

1. Assemble: Unified Hallowed Meeting

Build a community-wide pastors’ group that meets consistently and holds a yearly sacred gathering (Isaiah 58:1-12; Ephesians 2:11-22).

a. Begin or enter a racially and denominationally varied community of kingdom-inclined pastors in our community region. A national group has already been formed at letstalklive.org/.

b. Come together consistently with kingdom-inclined pastors to improve relations, offer reciprocal support and to meet the demands of one another.

2. Address: Unified Caring Tone

Aggressively cultivate disciples who speak out with unified messaging, presenting biblical truths and answers on current social problems (John 17:13-23; Matthew 28:16-20).

a. Pursue common ground and common goals that encourage biblical answers to current problems needing to be tackled, instead of becoming caught on the areas of conflict. Demonstrate grace.

b. Hold conversation groups and prayer meetings to discover biblical responses to social problems.

3. Act: Unified Community Affect

Jointly organize our church to achieve a noticeable spirit of continuing good works enhancing the good of underserved neighborhoods (Jeremiah 29:5-7; Matthew 5:13-16).

a. Create a group for business leaders who would like to help in establishing work prospects and economic growth for underserved areas.

When we work together to *Assemble, Address, and Act* for God's kingdom in the public, we will create a larger effect as one. The extent of our unity will affect the extent of our influence.

Notes

1. Darrell L. Bock, *Cultural Intelligence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 54-58.

2. These approaches and intentions are adapted from Bock, *Cultural Intelligence*, 59-60.

3. Jonah Goldberg, "The Problem with 'Social Justice,'" *Indy Star*, February 6, 2019, www.indystar.com/story/opinion/2019/02/10/jonah-goldberg-the-problem-social-justice/2814705002/.

4. Tony Evans, *Oneness Embraced* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 328.

5. Evans, 329.
6. Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 4-5.
7. Evans, 328.
8. Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, Third Edition. NYU Press. Kindle Edition, p. 3.
9. Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 67.
10. Evans, 335.
11. New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Matthew 7:12.
12. Tony Evans, *Kingdom Race Theology* (Chicago: IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 89.
13. Adapted from *Kingdom Race Theology*, 100.

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Probe Live: Woke Theology

Probe Live presents “Woke Theology”

Kerby Anderson is president of Probe Ministries and host of the live nationwide Christian talk radio show “Point of View.” He addresses important questions:

- Is the social justice movement hijacking the gospel?
- What is all the fuss over Critical Race Theory? Where did that come from?
- What about White Fragility? What is that exactly?

The free booklets Kerby mentioned are available here: probe.org/kerby-anderson-booklets/

And be sure to check out the Head & Heart Podcast about Woke Theology here: probe.org/podcasts-and-messages/head-heart-podcasts/

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