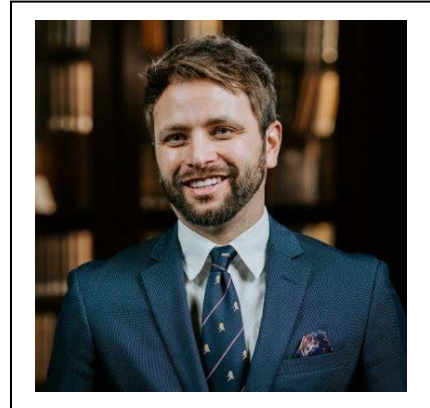


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What Wokeness Is Not, and What it Is

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In [yesterday's post](#), I tackled two good questions I've gotten in response to my "[Christianity & Wokeness](#)" lectures (and this video [excerpt](#) from the [first lecture](#)). I addressed 1) *what wokeness is* and 2) *who should be disciplined for teaching wokeness*.



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Today, I want to address a third good question that many are asking: *how do I determine what wokeness is not?* I front-loaded this question in my talks, addressing it in the first part of the first lecture. I did so because I know there is nothing less than tremendous confusion over wokeness in our time. People who care about justice, racism, and societal cohesion are commonly told they are woke by virtue of having these concerns. But in my view, such just biblical interests *in no way* signify that a given person is woke, or has embraced Critical Race Theory, or is "intersectional."

Again, if you want a fuller accounting of what wokeness is and is not, watch my [first lecture](#). That will give you a much fuller picture of textured, heavily-researched argument. But in the interest of responding to a good question that many folks are having today, below I'll briefly list what wokeness is not and what it is. My hope in this particular blog is to help people see, bit by bit, that we do not need wokeness to address major issues in our time. We need the Bible and the biblical worldview shaped by the gospel of grace (see [lecture two](#) for more on this theme).

What Wokeness Is Not

Without further ado, the following is a brief list of what does *not* constitute wokeness, either personally or at the church level:

- Wanting racial harmony does not make you woke.
- Wanting peace in fiery settings with a history of racial or ethnic tension does not make you woke.
- Seeing massive failings in American and Western history, namely long and sustained patterns of racist thought and practice, does not make you woke.

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- Being troubled in a major way by the complicity of past Christians in racism does not make you woke.
- Adopting children from a different region or with a different skin color does not make you woke, nor does an “interracial” marriage.
- Grieving the needless death of human beings made in the image of God, bearing God-given dignity and purpose, 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.
- Enjoying global culture, and culture that differs from your own background, does not make you woke.
- Knowing that Jesus Christ was a Middle-Eastern Jew, and not a white American with flowing locks, does not make you woke.
- Praying for greater diversity in your church through the saving of fellow sinners does not make you woke.
- Wanting greater justice in a world that is filled with hostility, pain, and a lack of justice does not make you woke.
- Working to be more thoughtful with one’s language regarding racial or ethnic difference does not make you woke.
- Recognizing you have in yourself everything needed to spew racist and ethnocentric hate, and act on this in short-term or long-term ways, does not make you make.
- Identifying troubling racist or ethnocentrist trends in one’s national, regional, communal, or familial heritage does not make you woke, nor does wanting to leave such evil behind.
- Rejoicing in gospel-driven fellowship across all common boundary-markers in this world does not make you woke.

These statements matter because many people today are confused about what wokeness is. Many wonder if they are instinctually woke because they hate racism and ethnocentrism, love humanity as made in God’s image, want to work as much as possible against sin of all kinds, think deeply about their own failings and those of their community, and generally seek unity in the gospel.

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But all this is *not* wokeness in action. This is basic biblical Christianity, and the two are not the same—not at all. Everything we need to address what ails in the church and broader society is found squarely in Scripture. From this standpoint, the church of Christ is equipped to engage real issues in American culture and society. We should have conversation over policing, urban tensions, the nature of justice, America’s checkered past, our current policies, crime and punishment, the future of diversity, the best way to lift people out of poverty, and many more such matters.

Beyond these specific conversations, caring deeply about unity, diversity, harmony, justice, and appropriate forms of belonging does not a leftist make. Christians can and should enthusiastically participate in such conversations. We have for centuries, even millennia, and we should today. We should do so, further, in a posture of humility, grace, and charity; we do so with historical awareness and sensitivity, not defensiveness and pride.

But What Is Wokeness—What Does it Call for?

If all this is in play, though, what is wokeness? Since I gave the definition in yesterday’s post, let me list here some of the fundamental tenets and action points of wokeness, diverse as it is as a system:

- According to the woke, beneficiaries of “whiteness” must identify themselves as “racist” and thus embrace, in a kind of secular conversion experience that is often marked by public declaration, being an “antiracist” through confession.
- America as a country is shot through with “white supremacy” that benefits “white” people in particular and all who uncritically support (or do not challenge) our system of “white privilege.”
- Accordingly, in the church, Christians are being called to “repent” for their “whiteness” and reject their inherent “white fragility”
- Christians are told that they are complicit in the racist sins of their forebears
- Christians are urged to read complex realities and events in mono-causal terms, with racism as the cause (e. g., poverty, crime rates, shootings, educational disparities)
- Christians are encouraged to align with Black Lives Matter, an organization with a polar-opposite worldview on matters of the natural family, the sexes, and human sexuality

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- Christians are told to see “capitalism” as oppressive, unfair, and unjust, with socialism of various kinds as the preferable system
- Christians are told that “white interpretation” has held the church captive to a white agenda for too long, necessitating scholarship and research rooted in standpoint epistemology
- Christians are urged to support “reparations” and distributive justice (over against retributive justice)
- Christians hear that they should support cultural relativism, and that making judgments (along moral and other lines) about cultural practices is wrong
- Christians are directed to add their voice to “defund the police”

Because America is inherently a racist society, shot through with white supremacy, proponents of wokeness argue that we should embrace a sweeping program of “social justice.” Common proposals that will supposedly advance “social justice” include the following: reparations for descendants of slaves; restructuring of hiring to ensure diverse personnel; protest and opposition, even with violence if necessary, to stubbornly “racist” entities and individuals; reeducation of youth to show the systemic wickedness of America as a country; the practice of “lament,” personal confession of one’s inherent racism (especially if “white”), and public acts of secular repentance to right wrongs; and, most generally, the destruction at every turn of “white supremacy” anywhere it can be found (and it is everywhere).

This is not the place to evaluate all these claims. I give extended air time to these and related claims in my [third lecture](#), and encourage those sorting all this out to watch it. That session will hopefully help to begin answering woke thought with sound words from Scripture. Beyond this lecture, I encourage those who are wrestling with this conversation to watch the [entire “Christianity & Wokeness” series](#). It will not answer every question or address every issue. It will, however, give the church a grid by which to make sense of the anti-gospel system of wokeness.

Wokeness and Christianity: Similar Language and Concerns, But Not the Same System

Wokeness in the final analysis is not simply a posture that embraces justice and social change. It is this to some, to be sure, but in truth wokeness is much, much more. It is a developed system of thought, admittedly broad and complex, and its core principles and ideas sound consonant with Christian categories. Indeed, we believers *want* image-

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bearers to press for justice and needed change in society; we see such instincts all around us today, and on the face of it, we share such concerns. Further, our society does have real racist failings in the past, and certainly has the capacity for similar travesties today (as I say unequivocally [here](#) and [here](#)). Further, the societal issues mentioned above do merit real and sustained attention.

As figures like Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Harvey Mansfield, Roger Scruton, and many others have shown, there are serious sources of redress at hand. We need not embrace big-government statism or leftist ideology to repair our body politic; there is a wealth of insight to be had from the tradition grounded in human dignity and an ordered civilization characterized by sound laws, jurisprudence, and political institutions. Such ideas are not in every case promoted by Christians, but in my judgement, sound conservative thought flows (whether a given thinker claims it or not) from biblical ideals—e. g., dignity of the human person, rights of private property, retributive justice, balance of powers, primacy of the free market, and much more. These concepts and others are not parallel to God's revelation as some might argue, but are in truth derived from it, whether in common-grace terms or special-grace terms.

It might seem, then, that wokeness's stated burden for justice means that it can fit neatly with Christianity. The problem, though, is that while wokeness supposedly shares a vision for equity and virtue, it is radically different from Scripture and the biblical worldview. When you actually delve into woke literature, and when you study Critical Race Theory and intersectionality in particular, you come away shocked by what you see in many senses. In both [cure and diagnosis, wokeness as advanced by figures like Ibram Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, and Richard Delgado is not Christianity](#); it does not advance biblical justice. It is in truth a compromise of true biblical justice, and a corruption of the true biblical gospel. It has common concerns with the church, yes, but it addresses those concerns from a radically different vantage-point than the biblical worldview. As just one example, woke scholars and activists see heartbreaking events unfold as Christians do, but in a great many respects propose a different diagnosis and cure than the Bible lays out and the biblical worldview affords.

In this sense, we are reminded how Marxism can sound like Christianity at some points, and how postmodernism can sound like Christianity at some points, and how aestheticism can sound like Christianity at some points. But as the church has learned many times over in the past, using the language of Christianity, and addressing common concerns, does not make a system Christian. Indeed, over and over again the church has had to warn the sheep of these unbiblical systems, even if they articulate certain principles that initially sound right. Few evangelical pastors I know of today would

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commend Marxism to their people; few would endorse postmodernism; few would commend Enlightenment rationalism.

Conclusion

Where there may be scattered resonances with biblical truth in the ideologies just named, scores of sound pastors and Christians know (praise God) that such systems must not be embraced. (Truly, we must always be careful to separate systems from events. This is vital, and often neglected or missed.) Instead, though connected in certain ways to real societal issues—unsound thought often springs from a half-truth or a genuine crisis—these ideologies must be resisted. So it is with CRT, intersectionality, and wokeness. This is the point I am making in my talks, writings, and in this rather lengthy little blog itself. A concern for societal justice is good and right; Critical Race Theory, however, will not ultimately advance it. Buyer beware.

At the risk of over-stressing this, to understand why I make these claims, watch [the series](#) (not just a short video). I will likely write more here in days ahead (see [this book](#), and also [this one](#)). My prayer in all this work is not that the church will retreat from the fight for justice and hope and change in our time, but rather that the church will promote such ideals in dependence on the whole counsel of God, including the biblical doctrines of sin, salvation, and justice. It is not secular thinking in Christian language that we need in our time; it is Christian thinking in biblical terms that manifests in distinctly Christian love for God and neighbor.

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