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What Does it Mean to Be “Woke” and How Does Church Discipline Apply?

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Recently, I gave [a series of lectures](#)¹ about “wokeness.” These lectures occasioned many responses on social media. Some responses showed a lack of familiarity with the actual content I delivered, which is always surprising. After all, my talks were not driven by *ad hominem* name-calling, but rather a real intellectual respect for the proponents of wokeness. Though I am no perfect speaker (I do entirely too many hand-motions, for starters), I did not burn their system down with a hashtag; I read their material, watched their content, and did my best to show respect for their scholarship, even though I found much to disagree with in that body of work.

On the other hand, many people did not simply dismiss me, and that was heartening. Whether agreeing with my case in full or not, they did what we all must do in seeking the truth: they asked questions, including many good-faith questions. I’m a professor, and I always enjoy the part of class where my students raise questions. In this post, I’ll engage just two. The most common question I heard in response to “Christianity and Wokeness” was this: *what is wokeness?* This is an excellent query, because wokeness is famously vague. After reading a great deal of pro-woke literature in order to understand the system (as such), I gave the following description and definition in [my first lecture](#): Wokeness is first and foremost a mindset and a posture borne of Critical Race Theory and related systems of thought. The term itself means that one is “awake” to the true nature of our society where so many fail to see it. In the most specific sense, this means one sees the comprehensive inequity of our social order and the corresponding need for racial and social justice. While there’s more to say here, this is my functioning definition.

The second most common question in response to my lectures (or actually, [this video clip](#)) was this: *am I calling for church discipline—especially excommunication—for anyone who in any form engages woke content?* This question, too, is fair game. While I answer it in both the video clip and the lecture that the clip intentionally pointed to, I’m glad to address it here. It’s no bad thing to take this opportunity to put my view on wokeness and excommunication in writing. After all, the stakes are very high, a point on which all sides ironically agree—those supporting wokeness believe we all need to be woke, and that the failure to become woke means our society and church lacks real justice. Those who

¹ See last page for video links for all four sessions of “Christianity and Wokeness.”

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oppose this ideology as I do believe we must not embrace wokeness, but rather embrace [a gospel-shaped worldview](#) in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free (see Galatians 3:27-28). In the [enchanted worldview](#) formed by faith in Christ, division, hostility, hatred, historic grievances, and prejudice of all kinds are overcome by [the power of the cross](#), even as we have [real and searing historic sins](#) to address.

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Back to the question at hand. Is everyone engaging wokeness the same way? No, we are not. There is actually a great deal of variance and confusion over wokeness. This is true even among those who support it (or think they do, or have been told they must). In my reckoning, we can identify at least four different groups who are responding to Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and wokeness. I'll outline them below. As I said in the [first lecture](#) and as you'll see below, I believe discipline is not only possible but necessary for the fourth group. (The material below is nothing other than a slight expansion of that first talk, with no content or conviction altered in any way.)

The first category is the **non-woke**. I won't spell this group's view out at length because I do so in the first lecture. While I believe this group—which encompasses people of every conceivable ethnicity and background—is in the right, I also hold that this group should strive to be as respectful and gracious as they can be with those of other camps. The second category is populated by the **confused and undecided**. As I read things, there are a ton of people in this second group. These people are watching major events play out in American society with growing distress. They are not racists, and they in fact despise racism. However, they do not have the inclination, time, or tools to investigate wokeness and CRT in a deep way. As a result, they don't know what to think about matters related to wokeness, but are uneasy at all turns. My hope for this group is that they receive good, clear shepherding in their church, shepherding that will lead them squarely away from the unbiblical system of wokeness.

The third category is made up of the **engaged yet cautious pro-woke**. This group wants very much to handle the vexing matter of racism well, and so plugs in to social media to do so. They may use popular hashtags and slogans, read some material about racism, and speak against it. Members of this group haven't done a deep-dive in CRT, but they do have a real passion for justice and the defeat of racism (as they should in biblical terms), and so they embrace wokeness. They conflate embracing wokeness with being salt and light in a Matthew 5 sense. For the reasons outlined in my [third lecture in particular](#), this group needs a gracious but firm hand in a theological sense; though not filling the role of a false teacher, they are in danger, and need to be turned back from the direction they are going, for it is a path that leads only to compromise.

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The fourth group is made up of the **convinced and committed pro-woke**. This group is all in on CRT. They read the literature; they encourage the activism; they have fully bought into the critique of society and culture offered by CRT. They are in teaching and ministry positions, and they are actively encouraging fellow Christians to become woke (and intersectional as a result). The positions outlined in my first lecture are the positions of this group, albeit with some variances in a theology of gender and sexuality (to mention one category). This fourth group is the type that actively promotes authors and ideas who teach CRT, wokeness, and intersectionality. Pastors in this group command white people to repent for their sins; theologians in this group practice standpoint epistemology; lay believers network in their congregations to *urge* fellow members to go woke.

Let us state up front that it is hard for we who are human to know of the fourth group—the convinced and committed—why a given person is promoting wokeness. Our focus is not their motive, though that is not unimportant; our primary focus is the truth, and departure from it. As we pray for them, and as we speak the truth in love per Ephesians 4:15, we must seek the repentance and recovery of such individuals. We want unity, after all, unity in the truth of Jesus Christ and his apostles. In terms of personal friends and members, we must follow the steps of discipline per Matthew 18:15-20 on these matters, even as we publicly confront those teaching unbiblical ideas in a broader sense. Though it hopefully will not end in formal separation due to repentance early on in the Matthew 18 process, church discipline should indeed be the outcome faced by those who cling to divisive and ungodly ideology. At the institutional level, the same principle applies. Trustees, voting members, organizational leaders, educational boards and so on must not tolerate the spread of wokeness—**convinced and committed pro-wokeness**—any longer.

Some will think this sounds strong. Indeed it does, for we are in an era of little theological definition, and even less spiritual discernment. As we hold our ground here, we must make clear that we do so not in hatred, as some will think, but in love (Ephesians 4:15). It is loving to oppose systems that would take us captive. Wokeness is one such system (see Colossians 2:8). As I state unflinchingly in my talks, and even now repeat without a millimeter of hedging or change, many are engaging wokeness, and we need to reach out to them. They are not doing so in all the same ways; some are terribly confused and need teaching, some are drifting and need gracious but firm correction, and some not only believe but promote ungodly ideology and must be called to account in the most sober terms.

Our prayer is that God will turn these people back, and lead them into the good paths. We all need discipline, in truth; discipline is no exotic thing, but is a key part of the Christian life. Well before we get to excommunication, we must recognize that the Father

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disciplines all he loves, for we all stumble in many ways (Hebrews 12:6; James 3:2). Though we pray excommunication is needed only in rare cases, the truth is that we must all truly wake up to the system spreading through our society and church. The hour is late. The situation is dire. The sheep need help, and theological shepherding, and loving pastoral leadership anchored in truth.

Let us do all we can to give it to them.



Christianity and Wokeness Lecture Series:

- * Lecture 1: <https://youtu.be/7BvWsCnRSxk>
- * Lecture 2: <https://youtu.be/kuCgGE-19rE>
- * Lecture 3: https://youtu.be/vvWbf_9WA0Y
- * Lecture 4: <https://youtu.be/hGEZGxmBS9A>

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<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2020/10/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke-and-how-does-church-discipline-apply/>