

DEFINING WOKENESS

INTRODUCTION

- For years, social justice has been a hot button issue in society and the church
- At stake in the issue is: How do we address racial injustices taking place in our country?
- Churches and individual Christians have been confused about how best to answer this question
 - Should believers and churches promote the social justice agenda and stand up for the oppressed and the outcast?
 - Should believers seek to reshape society through the political process by activism, protests and lobbying?
 - Should “redeeming the culture” be a key part of the mission of the church?
- Confusion on this issue poses a great threat to the unity of the church

WHAT CHRISTIANS CAN AGREE ON

- At a minimum, we can all agree on the fact that Christians ought to be loving, compassionate, and kind toward those who are oppressed, mistreated, or marginalized by society
- Christians should be known for acts of kindness and grace and should respond compassionately toward all

Matthew 22:39 ~ The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37

James 1:27 ~ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- Due to the fall, there will be widows, fatherless, and oppressed people in society and, modeling the ministry of Christ, we should express compassion by mourning with those who mourn

Romans 12:15 ~ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

- We must acknowledge that there are oppressed people groups in our society, that the sin of racism exists, and many in our country have been treated wrongly on the basis of skin color
- We must admit that many individuals have been hurt by prejudiced comments and actions
- We must vehemently denounce and oppose the evil of racism!
- But we have different reasons for doing so....

DEFINITIONS WITHIN THE WOKE MOVEMENT

Social Justice

- “Social Justice as a concept arose in the early 19th century during the Industrial Revolution and subsequent civil revolutions throughout Europe, which aimed to create more egalitarian societies and remedy capitalistic exploitation of human labor. Because of the stark stratifications between wealthy and the poor

during this time, early social justice advocates focused primarily on capital, property, and the distribution of wealth. By the mid-20th century, social justice had expanded from being primarily concerned with economics to include other spheres of social life to include the environment, race, gender, and other causes and manifestations of inequality.”¹

- “Social Justice – A socially just world meets everyone’s basic needs (food, housing, health care, education, job, social security) in a dignified way; treats people from every background with dignity and respect; supports the development of all people to their full potential; guarantees equitable distribution of resources; makes sure all people are physically and psychologically safe and secure; and ensures everyone has a voice in the decisions that affect them.”²
- Advocates of social justice maintain that there are always issues of power and oppression at play when there is diversity
- The aim of social justice proponents is to move towards a more just world with less oppression and more freedom and equality among people from different groups
- Usually the primary causes of social injustice are related to differences in race, class, and gender

Systemic Racism

- “Systemic racism consists of organizational culture, policies, directives, practices, or procedure that exclude, displace, or marginalize some racialized groups or create unfair barriers for them to access valuable benefits and opportunities. This is often the result of institutional biases in organizational culture, policies, directives, practices, and procedures that may appear neutral but have the effect of privileging some groups and disadvantaging others.”³
- “Racism serves the purpose of maintaining white supremacy and privilege. Racism by whites against people of color is not only those individual acts of hate, but also a system of exclusion, discrimination and criminalization, which ensures that the elites (while mostly white, the elites are now people of color as well) can maintain their power. Race Prejudice + Power = Racism.”

3 expressions of racism

- **Personal:** The way in which we perpetuate racism on an individual basis. Examples: calling someone a racist name, making a racist assumption.
- **Cultural:** The norms, values, or standards assumed by the dominant society which perpetuate racism. Examples: thin, blond, white women as the basis for our society’s standard of beauty; women on welfare are assumed to be black or brown and are portrayed as irresponsible ...requiring people to speak English as a way of deliberately destroying community and culture.
- **Institutional:** The way in which institutions – Housing, Government, Education, Media, Business, Health Care, Criminal Justice, Religion – perpetuate racism. Examples: people of color under-represented and misrepresented on television, racially biased standardized tests used to determine who will be admitted to higher education programs and institutions...reliance on low-paying immigrant labor by farms and factories.”⁴

While Privilege/White Supremacy/Implicit Bias

¹ <https://www.pachamama.org/social-justice/what-is-social-justice>

² <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

³ <https://www.ontario.ca/document/data-standards-identification-and-monitoring-systemic-racism/glossary>

⁴ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

- “White Privilege is perpetuated in the US by both individual and institutional racism that prevents non-white people from receiving equal access to all levels of society. It is a term to identify the privileges, opportunities, and advantages offered by the American society to anyone who is accepted as “white” (or white enough), and serves as an exemption in many particular cases from certain societal burdens or liabilities. It manifests itself in a number of ways, such as, better housing, education, economic opportunities, higher wages, etc.”⁵
- “White Supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.”⁶
- Implicit Bias - “Thoughts and feelings are ‘implicit’ if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature. We have a bias when, rather than being neutral, we have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people. Thus, we use the term ‘implicit bias’ to describe when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge. A fairly commonplace example of this is seen in studies that show that white people will frequently associate criminality with black people without even realizing they’re doing it.”⁷
- According to advocates of CRT and wokeness, every major aspect of our culture is riddled with racism and the effects of white supremacy including math education, objective truth, and Western values
- Thus, all white people are viewed as racists who must continually acknowledge their racism (even though there is no real solution for the guilt), oppose their nature as a white person by trying to be less white, and admit that silence on racial matters is violence

TALKING ABOUT RACE | NMAAHC

ASPECTS & ASSUMPTIONS OF WHITENESS & WHITE CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

White dominant culture, or *whiteness*, refers to the ways white people and their traditions, attitudes and ways of life have been normalized over time and are now considered standard practices in the United States. And since white people still hold most of the institutional power in America, we have all internalized some aspects of white culture—including people of color.

Rugged Individualism

- The individual is the primary unit
- Self-reliance
- Independence & autonomy highly valued + rewarded
- Individuals assumed to be in control of their environment, “You get what you deserve”

Family Structure

- The nuclear family: father, mother, 2,3 children is the ideal social unit
- Husband is breadwinner and head of household
- Wife is homemaker and subordinate to the husband
- Children should have own rooms, be independent

Emphasis on Scientific Method

- Objective, rational linear thinking
- Cause and effect relationships
- Quantitative emphasis

History

- Based on Northern European immigrants’ experience in the United States
- Heavy focus on the British Empire
- The primacy of Western (Greek, Roman) and Judeo-Christian tradition

Protestant Work Ethic

- Hard work is the key to success
- Work before play
- “If you didn’t meet your goals, you didn’t work hard enough”

Religion

- Christianity is the norm
- Anything other than Judeo – Christian tradition is foreign
- No tolerance for deviation from single god concept

Status, Power & Authority

- Wealth = worth
- Your job is who you are
- Respect authority
- Heavy value on ownership of goods, space, property

Future Orientation

- Plan for future
- Delayed gratification
- Progress is always best
- “Tomorrow will be better”

Time

- Follow rigid time schedules
- Time viewed as a commodity

Aesthetics

- Based on European culture
- Steak and potatoes; “bland is best”
- Woman’s beauty based on blonde, thin – “Barbie”
- Man’s attractiveness based on economic status, power, intellect

Holidays

- Based on Christian religions
- Based on white history & male leaders

Justice

- Based on English common law
- Protect property & entitlements
- Intent counts

Competition

- Be #1
- Win at all costs
- Winner/loser dichotomy
- Action Orientation
- Master and control nature
- Must always “do something” about a situation
- Aggressiveness and Extroversion
- Decision-Making
- Majority rules (when Whites have power)

Communication

- “The King’s English” rules
- Written tradition
- Avoid conflict, intimacy
- Don’t show emotion
- Don’t discuss personal life
- Be polite

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

⁵ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

⁶ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

⁷ <https://perception.org/research/implicit-bias/>

⁸ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/whiteness>

Oppression

- “Oppression is the systematic and pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society.”⁹

Patriarchy

- “Patriarchy is an economic, political, cultural and social system of domination of women and transgender people that privileges non-transgender men. Patriarchy is based on binary definitions of gender (male/female) with strict gender roles. It also relies upon rigidly enforced heterosexuality that places male/straight/non-transgender as superior and women/queer/transgender as inferior. Patriarchy shapes and is shaped by white supremacy, capitalism, and the state. Together, they form interlocking systems of oppression.”¹⁰

Cancel Culture

- “Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. *Cancel culture* is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming”¹¹
- This is what we are seeing in our country now with the removal of statues of supposed racists, the renaming of the Washington Redskins football team, the threat to destroy Mt. Rushmore, the “retirement” of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, etc.

Microaggression

- “Microaggression is a term used for commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups. The term was coined by Harvard University psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe insults and dismissals which he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflicting on African Americans. By the early 21st century, use of the term was applied to the casual degradation of any socially marginalized group, including LGBT people, people living in poverty, and people who are disabled.”¹²

WHAT WOKENESS IS NOT

- A definition: “Woke as a political term of African American origin refers to a perceived awareness of issues concerning social justice and racial justice. It is derived from the African-American Vernacular English expression ‘stay woke’, whose grammatical aspect refers to a continuing awareness of these issues.”¹³
- Before we can really flesh out what it means to be “woke,” it is important to first define what it is not
- Because many believers do care about oppressed people and hate racism and all forms of ethnocentrism, they wonder if they are intrinsically woke

⁹ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

¹⁰ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

¹¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/cancel-culture/>

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microaggression>

¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>

- Because many Christians recognize that all people are made in God’s image and they do want to work hard against all sin and want to see unity in the gospel, they might be open to the idea of being woke
- Therefore, it is critical to draw a clear line between biblical Christianity and wokeness since they are not even close to being the same

- The following stances are convictions that stem from biblical wisdom and the Gospel in practice, not from the godless ideology of wokeness:¹⁴
 - 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.
 - 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.

- It is important to state what wokeness is not to show that a woke approach to racial issues is not the only option
- “[W]okeness does not have the market cornered, and Christians therefore must not confuse a godly approach to one’s ethnicity and background with the adoption of woke thinking and acting.”¹⁵
- These distinctions prepare the way for us to conclude that the answer to the problems that ail us is not wokeness, but rather the all-sufficient Word of God and the Person and work of Jesus Christ who redeems and unifies all who are in Him

WHAT WOKENESS IS

- If the convictions mentioned in the previous section don’t make one woke, then what does?

¹⁴ This section taken from the article “What Wokeness Is Not, and What It Is” by Owen Strachan at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2020/10/7723/>

¹⁵ Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 8.

- “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.”¹⁶
- Owen Strachan identifies seven key commitments of wokeness:¹⁷
 1. The world is fundamentally divided into oppressors and oppressed people
 2. A major form of oppression today comes from whiteness
 3. “Whiteness” is not a neutral system, but creates a culture of “white supremacy” that most benefits “white” people (and also others who fail to challenge it)
 4. The evils of this culture show up in disparities between groups, which reveal inequities, which reveal injustices (disparities lead to inequities, which lead to injustices)
 5. “White supremacy” must be vigorously opposed through “social justice,” “antiracism,” and targeting of “white privilege”
 6. More broadly, any form of “privilege” and “oppression” stemming from heteronormative “white” capitalists patriarchalist structures must be opposed
 7. We can create a just, fair, diverse, and inclusive society grounded in equality of outcome by targeting inequities through political, legal, cultural, and fiscal means so that inequitable authority is deprived and minority groups are empowered
- Thus, in this view the regular, white, American is worse than actual white supremacists like cross-burning members of the KKK, even if they don’t actively promote racist ideas
- What is shocking about these claims is that most countries have one ethnicity represent a major part of their population
- Despite some problems associated with normal effects of the fall, this “majority culture” is not inherently wicked since ethnic differences are not necessarily evil
- “Having a majority culture practiced by a citizenry that to some extent looks alike and has a shared heritage is not necessarily a sign of sin.”¹⁸
- But, wokeness “argues that the existence of racism in American means that ‘white’ people fall prey to a special form of evil beyond normal Adamic fallenness. This is because of America’s ‘white supremacist’ order; the country and public order themselves are corrupt, not just the ‘white’ populace...the average ‘white’ person today is much like an intentional racist of the American past, whether or not they actually say or do anything traditionally identified as racist...There is no common grace in wokeness; there’s just the righteous (the woke) and the guilty (ordinary white people). The [well-meaning ‘white’] housewife is not just a part of the broader unjust framework...she is the very burning core of the problem. Even as she posts photos of her kids on Instagram, bakes pumpkin muffins in the fall, and volunteers at her local homeless shelter, she is actually a ‘white supremacist.’ She not only participates in the collective problem; in a real sense, she is the problem.”¹⁹
- Thus, the only way forward in combating one’s personal racism is to become an “antiracist”
- There can be no middle ground...there is either racism or antiracism
- What antiracism requires is a complete and total rejection of the entire social order and power structures which have given birth to a culture of systemic racism
- Woke advocates call for a kind of “secular conversion experience” whereby those complicit in America’s racist roots contribute to the destruction of the entire system

¹⁶ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2020/10/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke-and-how-does-church-discipline-apply/>

¹⁷ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

- “Common proposals include reparations for descendants of slaves; restructuring hiring practices to ensure diverse personnel; protesting and opposing...stubbornly ‘racist’ entities and individuals; reeducating youth to show the systemic wickedness of America as a country; practicing ‘lament’ and the personal confession of one’s inherent racism (especially if ‘white’); performing public acts of secular repentance to right wrongs; and, most generally, the destruction at every turn of ‘white supremacy’ anywhere it can be found.”²⁰
- In short, what is called for is both a personal and social revolution, even involving force and violence if necessary, in order to demolish America’s evil societal nature
- Specifically, the following fundamental tenets of wokeness drive the system:²¹
 - 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
 - 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”
- From this short description, it should be obvious that, while wokeness and Christianity use similar language and have similar concerns, they are not the same system
- Believers and woke advocates both realize the reality of racism, both want God’s image-bearers to respect other image-bearers, and both desire equity and virtue
- However, wokeness is radically different from a biblical worldview in that it offers a different diagnosis and cure than what the Bible calls for
- Therefore, even though there might be some overlap in terms, the two approaches could not be more opposed to one another
- And, “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.”²²

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹ This section taken from the article “What Wokeness Is Not, and What It Is” by Owen Strachan at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2020/10/7723/>

²² Ibid.

WHERE DID WOKENESS COME FROM?

- The roots of wokeness are found in Karl Marx who, along with Friedrich Engels, published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848
- In it, they claimed that the history of societies is the history of class struggles
 - **Marxism** – “Marxism is a social, political, and economic philosophy named after Karl Marx, which examines the effect of capitalism on labor, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favor of communism. Marxism posits that the struggle between social classes, specifically between the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, and the proletariat, or workers, defines economic relations in a capitalist economy and will inevitably lead to revolutionary communism.”²³
 - Classical Marxism is primarily economic in nature...Marx saw history playing out as a great conflict between oppressors (those who control the means of production) and the oppressed (those who are not economically privileged)
 - He believed that problems within a society were from institutions of authority which, by their very nature, are oppressive
 - As a result, he called for the destruction of all authority structures and institutions
 - This would result in a classless society where people would no longer have to relate as superiors and inferiors
 - It is only when these hierarchical structures are demolished that societies would be free from oppression
 - He called for the destruction of structures of authority because he hated God and wanted to eradicate any delegated authority from God (individual, family, church, and state)
 - **Cultural Marxism/Neo-Marxism** – Cultural Marxism also sees a class struggle (as classical Marxism does); however, rather than economics being the primary determiner of one’s identity (i.e. rich vs. poor), it is race, gender, and class that determines whether one belongs to an oppressor or oppressed group. Majority groups are viewed as privileged or oppressive. Minority groups are viewed as underprivileged and oppressed. Cultural Marxism aims to overthrow majority groups and the structures which keep them in power.
 - **Cultural Hegemony** – “In Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society — the beliefs and explanations, perceptions, values, and mores — so that the imposed, ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm.”²⁴
 - According to proponents of social justice, the ruling cultural hegemony in the US is white, male, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied
 - These groups are inherently oppressive; those minorities who do not fit into these groups are the oppressed
 - **Critical Race Theory** – Critical race theory places all people in one of two camps: oppressor or oppressed, largely based on their ethnicity.
 - Critical race theory is derived from Critical Theory (CT), which originated in the Frankfurt School which was a school of Marxist sociological and philosophical thought associated with the Institute for Social Research in what is today Frankfurt, Germany, in the early 20th century

²³ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/marxism.asp>

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_hegemony

- It was a theory that was “critical” of capitalism and whose primary goal was to understand and help overcome the social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed
- **Intersectionality** – “Intersectionality is the theory that attends to the complexity of identity and experience as constructed by multiple, interlocking systems of power (such as racism, classism, sexism...) for the purpose of understanding and shifting those systems of power.”²⁵
 - Intersectionality says that certain oppressed people are more oppressed than others based on their various identities
 - Thus, black, female, homosexuals would be more greatly oppressed because of the number of “intersections” which contradict the cultural hegemony
- Thus, as is clear, wokeness is built upon a Marxist ideology: “The world is fundamentally flawed; only a few enlightened folks can see it. The world is not divided along the lines the Bible says it is (saved and unsaved), but between the oppressor and the oppressed; liberation is not found in any theological solution, but through identification of the oppression – often hidden – that society transmits. This is Marx’s own tool, updated and revised.”²⁶
- In other words, wokeness emerges from a secular worldview and is rooted in ideologies that are incompatible with Christianity because it establishes human identity in ideas other than being created in the image of God and, for believers, being identified by our relationship in Christ

CONCLUSION

- Although many claim that CRT and wokeness function as a set of analytical tools that explain how race functions in society and that they are indispensable for righting what is wrong with racial issues, such is not the case
- Sadly, what CRT and wokeness promise to deliver they can’t
- Instead, the result of such godless systems is division and further discord
- “Wherever it is introduced, CRT deliberately provokes and feeds on disunity. It intensifies ethnic hostility, promotes crass identity politics, foments resentment, and imputes guilt or victimhood to people according to their skin color...The divisive effects of such a worldview are now obvious. CRT has not helped, much less healed, social* strife and ethnic divisions. It has made those problems exponentially worse.”²⁷

²⁵ <http://www.act4socialjustice.com/social-justice-definitions/>

²⁶ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 22.

²⁷ John MacArthur, foreword to *Christianity and Wokeness* by Owen Strachan, page xix, xxi.

