

## TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

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Speaker 2:

During the last board meeting at Brainerd Public Schools there was an open discussion on critical race theory, a movement that looks at social and legal issues in the US and how they relate to race and racism. During the meeting people for and people against voiced their opinions. Chris Burns has the story.

Chris Burns:

Teach the truth and divisiveness were two common phrases heard when more than 50 people came to the latest Brainerd Public Schools board meeting. 19 community members-

John Dickson:

That's a clip from local PBS news in Lakeland, Minnesota back in July 2021. Meetings like this have been happening all across the US as school districts debate what their students should be taught about American history. According to The New York Times, in the last two years dozens of state legislatures have introduced bills that would limit what teachers can say about complicated subjects like race, gender, and inequality.

Speaker 4:

It's not being taught in our schools, and we have people running around in the newspaper, we have people running around in the community saying that we're teaching this in our schools, we are not teaching it in our schools, and while I sit at this desk we won't, if I have anything to say about it.

John Dickson:

The "it" this teacher is talking about is critical theory, or more specifically, critical race theory, and it's taken centre stage over the last few years as it attempts to unmask and then undermine the alleged oppressive structures of Western society. But it's not the only type of critical theory out there. You might have heard of feminist theory, or queer theory, and these are controversial too, obviously. Many folks, mainly on the conservative side of politics, have been vocal against such theories.

But here's the thing, the basic aim of critical theory is to make visible the hidden structures of a culture so as to critique society, and then in the best forms of critical theory, bring about improvements. And that broad aim is something that everyone, regardless of political convictions, should be able to get

behind. And our guest today is an expert in all of this, and he reckons the Bible has its own way of exposing the flaws of our culture, and of course, pointing to the good. The Bible, in other words has, a critical theory of its own. I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academic's new book *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, edited by Brian J. Tabb and Andrew N. King. Each episode at Undeceptions we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

And if this hour of undeceiving isn't enough for you, join the Undeceptions Plus community for just \$5 Aussie a month. That's less than 59 South African rand. We've got plenty of listeners in South Africa, Sawubona to you. You'll get extended interviews with my guests, bonus episodes, and tons of other stuff. For this episode our Plus community gets a feast of critical theory extras. Head to [Undeceptions.com/plus](http://Undeceptions.com/plus).

Chris, before we get to your biblical critical theory, what is critical theory and its roots in European philosophy?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Yeah, it's one of those words like postmodernism, isn't it? It means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and I guess people are most likely to have come across the term recently in relation to something like critical race theory, which came up in the 1990s, a guy called Derrick Bell at Harvard, and it's a new way of thinking about race relations in society in a very particular way. But critical theory also has a number of other meanings, so there's the-

John Dickson:

That's Dr. Christopher Watkin, an Associate Professor in French Studies at Monash University in Melbourne. His specialty is European intellectual history, and he's written fabulous books on great impenetrable thinkers like Foucault and Derrida. His new book is called *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, and it's amazing. 672 pages of intelligence, clarity, and insight. I'm a real fan.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

So there's the early 20th century Frankfurt School of critical theory with people like Marcuse, and Gramsci, and Adorno and Horkheimer, and they were taking Marxism and trying to think culture in terms of Marxism. And then there's a broader term as well. So when I was an undergraduate I did a unit that was called modern critical theory, it's the best unit I did as an undergrad, it's fantastic. We didn't do Adorno and Horkheimer, we didn't do critical race theory, we did Derrida, Foucault, and all those people, and so there's a broader way in which critical theory means post-existentialist European philosophy as well.

John Dickson:

But their key idea, it's the critique of power, is it not? Critiquing how power tends to accrue to a certain group in society.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Yeah, so those parts of critical theory that draw on Foucault in particular, they were major on power, absolutely. I mean, the classical illustration of this that everybody uses, and I think everybody uses it because it's really good, is a pair of glasses. So I can look at my glasses, here we are, there's concave lenses, and they're a bit dirty actually, and there's some dust on them, but then I can put them on and I forget that they're there, but they influence everything that I see. I can see you because I've got my glasses on. And in the same way you can look at a theory, so something like Marxism, you can say, oh, that's really interesting what they do with base and super structure there, and oh, economy is really important, but then you can live through that, live in that.

And the way that I try and describe that in the book is that a critical theory, when you're wearing it, when you're inside it, does three things. It makes certain things in the world viable, certain things visible, and certain things valuable. So viable means certain things are possible to think. So for example, if you're a Christian, believing in God is viable, the way that you see the world, believe in God, makes sense. Yeah, I can see how that fits. But for a lot of people today, believing in God just isn't viable. There's no way that that fits into, if I'm an atheist's, my view of the world, that's past, that's over. So certain things will become viable in a particular way of looking at the world. Certain things also become visible.

So it's impossible to be aware of everything that's around us. We get, what is it, 11 million bytes of data comes into our system every second I think, something like that. The brain can only process 50 of those bytes. So we've got to always make selections of all the stuff that I'm getting, what's important? And different critical theories will make different things in the world visible, some will make oppression visible, they make power really visible, they make discrimination really visible, so that those are the things that leap out at you when you look out at the world, and also certain things will become valuable. You think about the French Revolution, equality suddenly comes to the head of the field, is we really, really want this. And when you're wearing those particular glasses, equality becomes really, really valuable. And that's what it means to live inside a critical theory, or to look through it, it shapes your view of the world in those three ways.

John Dickson:

This brings to mind a C.S. Lewis quote that I love so much it's framed on my study wall, although it's now on a ship to America. In an essay called *Is Theology Poetry?* Originally offered at the Socratic Club in Oxford, Lewis writes, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Do we all have a theory through which we're viewing the world? Because I think there are still some creatures who think that they've got a neutral position.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Yeah, I guess, fewer perhaps than there were in the 1990s. And it's interesting that that very idea, that what I should be aiming for in my view of the world is neutrality, that is really local and really situated. You go to most cultures at most points in history and you say, neutrality is really great, and they would say, what are you on about? That's ridiculous. And so the very idea that we should be neutral is a modern Western post-Cartesian way of looking at the world, it's just as situated as all the rest. So yes, everybody necessarily has a way of looking at, well it's not a bad thing, it's not as if we've got to try and get over that, it's just that we're finite, we're situated, we're human, and none of us sees everything all the time perfectly, and that's okay.

John Dickson:

Proposing a biblical critical theory might seem a little contrarian, or worse, derivative. But Chris, isn't jumping on a bandwagon with this idea, there's a great historical precedent for biblical critical theory and it comes from a thinker we might have mentioned once or twice here on Undeceptions.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I suppose it does sound a little bit jumping on the train once it started, everybody's got a critical theory so let's have a biblical one. I don't think that's what's going on, and the reason is Augustine. Augustine's City of God is, and I'm getting this from an Augustine scholar called Charles Matthews, he says, and I think it's persuasive, that it is the origin of the Western idea of critique, so no one does critique before Augustine. What he means is that people will criticize particular aspects of a society, but Augustine's City of God is the first book to take the whole of a particular society, the whole of a particular worldview, late Roman antiquity, and critique it as a whole, which he does in books one to 10 of the City of God.

And every critical theory that's subsequent to that is in a sense borrowing from that framework that Augustine gave us. And so if you want to put it this way, critical theory is originally a Christian idea, it's Augustine who introduced it into the tradition, and what I'm trying to do, very imperfectly, is to recover some of that Augustinian impetus, to draw on what Augustine is doing in the City of God and say, what might we say about today's society? If we want to do the same thing that he's doing with Rome, what would we say about today?

John Dickson:

Augustine, by the way, if I haven't said this before, is the Saint Augustine, or Augustine of Hippo, widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers, Christian or otherwise, of Western history. He wrote his massive The City of God in instalments over six or seven years, because he was a full-time Bishop, actually. He wrote it between AD 416 and 422, and that date is significant because the barbarians, or really the Visigoths, sacked the city of Rome on August 24th, AD 410. Some Romans blamed the Christians for this catastrophe, they said the church was responsible for turning people against the traditional gods and now the gods weren't protecting Rome and that's why the city fell.

Augustine writes the City of God as a massive reply to this claim, and he basically turns the criticism of the pagans on its head. He offers a detailed, subtle, and devastating critique of the ethics, politics, and religion of the earthly city of Rome, all set in contrast to the reign of Christ, the eternal city of God, which was human's only hope. One of his key points is that Rome's arrogance brought it down. In thinking it could enslave the world, Rome enslaved itself.

On the opening page of The City of God he remarks, "By humility we reach a height, a height, not grasped by human arrogance, but granted by divine grace, which transcends all these earthly pinnacles that totter with the shifts of time. And this is why, in addition to the City of God, I must also speak of the earthly city, the city which when it seeks dominion, even though whole peoples are its slaves, is its itself under the dominion of its very lust for domination." Here is the original critical theory.

People often think of critical theory, in all of its forms, really, whether it's in its feminist frame, or it's Marxist frame, or it's racial frame, as a demolition job, it's about trying to demolish the structures that are opposed to those who have a grievance. Is that what biblical critical theory is doing? It's demolishing, I don't know, the secular world or something?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I don't think we're going to get our heads around what biblical critical theory does if the two categories that we've got are demolishing and affirming. I think Augustine is doing something much more interesting than that, much more complex. I think he actually gets it from 1 Corinthians 1.

Speaker 6:

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligence I will frustrate.' Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached, to save those who believe. Jews demand signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God, for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

So what does Paul do in 1 Corinthians 1? He takes the key values of the two cultures in which he's living, so Greeks look for wisdom, they love being wise, that's their thing, and Jews look for miraculous signs, which later in the passage he talks about in terms of power. So there's these two values, there's power and there's wisdom. Now, does Paul do a demolition job or does he affirm those? Well, neither. What he does is what Daniel Strange, who's written a couple of books inspired by the mythologist J.H. Bavinck, has this really, really helpful phrase, he says, "It's a subversive fulfillment of these ideas."

So in other words, there is an utter antithesis in 1 Corinthians 1 between Greek wisdom and God's wisdom. They're completely separate because God's wisdom goes via the cross, and Paul says, "You Greek philosophers, that is the most foolish thing that you could ever think of, a man dying on a cross, that is the antithesis of wisdom." Well actually that's God wisdom, so there's an antithesis.

But he also, doesn't he, in that passage say, "The wisdom of God is wiser than human wisdom." He uses the same word, the Sophia of God is wiser than human Sophia. So there's a comparison that can be made as well, and there's a sense in which God's wisdom fulfills everything that that Greek wisdom is striving for but can't get in the way that it's looking for it. So it's this idea of complete antithesis and complete fulfillment, neither of which cancels out the other. It's not half and half, it's not half demolition, half affirmation, this subversive fulfillment means complete antithesis and complete fulfillment at the same time.

John Dickson:

Chris's book, biblical critical theory, takes a narrative approach, moving us from Genesis through to Revelation to show us how the Bible both critiques the culture, it also, perhaps surprisingly, fulfills what our culture, every culture, is looking for. Chris argues that from the first page of the Bible we get a balanced view of nature and our care of it. It's not grounded in magical superstition where nature is sacred and full of spirits, a very common view in antiquity, nor is it a disillusioned rational view that sees nature as just a resource to use and abuse.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I talk about that emulation to a very influential article that was published by a guy called Lynn White, Jr., and he criticizes Christians for, as he sees it, seeing nature just as stuff, resources to be used, and he says that's environmentally really destructive and we need to recover the idea, he says in his article, of sacred groves, we need to have an idea if there's some specialness to nature. And what I say-

John Dickson:

In 1967, historian Lynn White wrote an influential piece in the journal *Science* basically blaming the Christian worldview for the environmental crisis. You may remember we discussed this article in depth with climate science rockstar Professor Katharine Hayhoe back in episode 26, *Good Earth*. In the article White suggested we should return to a pre-Christian, or pagan approach, to nature.

"In antiquity," he writes, "every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men, centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or damned a brick it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying this pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." It's great writing, it's terrible biblical history and theology.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

And what I say in the book is that both those options are really sub-biblical, sub-Christian. Nature isn't just stuff. At the end of the creation account God looks on everything that he's created and says, "It's very good." That's not stuff at that point. But you don't need, in order to have some value in the natural world, to say that it's full of spirits, and in fact if you do you get yourself into all sorts of problems. So everybody will agree that the beautiful copse of trees has got spirits in it, but what about mass extinction events? They're equally natural. Do we have of sacred mass extinction event? Well, no, we don't like that idea. Well, how then do you pick and choose which bits of nature you put your spirits in? Well, we go along with post-enlightenment, post-romantic ideas of nature, and then it all falls apart because it's inconsistent.

I think what the Bible gives you is a firmer basis for respecting and caring for the natural world, which is not that it's full of spirits, but that God created it very good, and he cares for it, and he calls it good before the creation of Adam and Eve. So it's not just good for the sake of humans in Genesis, there's a sense in which it's good regardless of whether humans are there. And I think it's just a more robust environmental ethic than having to say that there are spirits in nature in order to make nature valuable.

John Dickson:

Yeah, so you're saying that the biblical view of creation holds together a kind of rationalism and wonder at the same time, as both grounded in a creator.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I think I'd put it slightly differently, I think I'd say that rationalism and wonder are dismembered limbs of a full Christian view. If you take parts of the complex Christian understanding of the natural world and you separate them off and then you isolate them, what you end up is on one side you've got rational, which was never intended to be cut off from wonder in the first place, and on the other hand you've got wonder. But that's a reductive heresy that's already done too much. You want to be in a place where rationalism and wonder haven't been separated from each other, And I think that's what you've got in Genesis 1 and 2.

John Dickson:

Before he leaves Genesis 1 and 2, Watkin has something to say about another foundational societal concept that ultimately comes from the Bible, the inestimable value of every man, woman, and child made in the image of God.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I think the language I would use for an adult is dignity without deity. So you have dignity as a human being because you're in the image of God, but you don't have deity, so the universe is not yours to do what you want with. And I think I'd add two other really important aspects of the image of God from

Genesis 1, which is you are not isolated, and you're not idle. So you're not isolated because there's that wonderful verse, isn't there, where God says in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

So the image of God is not you as an Adam, the image of God is us as humanity, so we're not isolated. I guess that's a really important message today, where social media, and et cetera, is always isolating, always focusing on the individual. That's not how we're to think about ourselves. And you're not idle in the sense that God gives Adam and Eve a very specific task to fulfill, fill the earth and subdue it, you've got a job, you've got a meaning for your life. There's more that the Bible says, of course, about meaning as you go into the new Testament, there's a lot more to say, but let's start here, your life has a meaning, you've been given a job to do, it's a really important one by God, so I'd want to add those things as well.

Canadian Pastor:

Out here today, folks, with a word of God. Yes, I know many of you are trying to look really creepy, but you want to know what's really creepy? Your life of sin. That's really creepy. As a matter of fact, some of you today are giving God the creeps. Oh, that's right. I know many of you care more about your costume than your creator, that's right, what a sin that is, that's called idolatry.

John Dickson:

That's a Canadian pastor preaching on the streets in 2015 outside a Toronto movie theatre showing some zombie movie, hence the reference to creepy costumes. Yelling at people to repent of their sins on street corners can be an odious Christian cliché, but Chris reckons the biblical ideas of sin, and even judgment, have loads to offer our culture. Seriously.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

There's a very interesting passage in *The God Delusion* where Dawkins, I'm paraphrasing, he says Christians always focus on sin, and he has this very rhetorically rich sentence, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin. And when I read that I thought, which theologians has this guy been reading? And I wonder whether that says more about his view of Christianity than it does actually about what it feels to live with Christian glasses on, so to speak.

I don't think the Bible presents sin in that way at all, and in the book I try to draw out a couple of consequences of sin that are actually really healthy. Let me start by sin is not good. It would be better if we didn't sin. So I'm not suggesting that there's some back door, it's wonderful that we sin, no, no, no. But, given that we are where we are, sin, I think, is a wonderful leveller, first of all. If you want equality you need sin, because everybody in the Bible sins, Kings, Queens, poor, rich people, young, old, doesn't matter, philosophers, everybody sins.

And so Dante, for example, in Canto 19 of his *Inferno*, he puts some popes in hell. And you might think, that's pretty cute, but he's making a massive theological point, everybody needs God's grace, it's an

absolute leveller. We all come to God on exactly the same terms, doesn't matter how much money you have, doesn't matter how clever you are. So equality finds a really rich foundation in sin.

I think democracy does as well, and C.S. Lewis is really good on this. In one of his journalistic pieces, in his contrary way that he loves to do he says, "Most people believe in democracy because they think human beings are wonderful," and he says, "I'm actually the opposite, I'm a Democrat because I believe in the fall of humanity." You think, what on earth are you talking about? And he says that the reason is that he knows that no one is good enough to bear the responsibility of ruling all by themselves as a despot, and therefore we need to spread power around, because we've all got our blind spots, we've all got our faults, we've all got our sins, and the more people who share power, the more likely it is to balance itself out.

And so I think sin provides a really powerful basis for equality, and it provides a really healthy basis for democracy in society as well.

Bluey:

Oh yeah, can we go to the library now?

Bandit Heeler:

No, it's closed mate.

Bluey:

But you said we could go after the trampoline.

Bandit Heeler:

Yeah, but we stayed way longer than I thought.

Bluey:

But you promised.

Bandit Heeler:

Oh man.

Bluey:

This episode of Bluey is called Promises.

John Dickson:

That's a clip from Australia's favored children's television series Bluey, which is also pretty popular overseas. I was in the US recently and this kid pointed at me and said to his mom, "That man sounds like

Bluey." Anyway, I don't think producer Kaley is just clutching its straws here putting her favored kids show in our show. It's true that kids often live on the promises of their parents, it's a bedrock of growing up, and when kids discover that parents sometimes don't keep promises it can be a little disorienting.

It's not a bad analogy of the next piece of the biblical puzzle, according to Chris Watkin. "The Bible," he says, "is similarly scaffolded by divine pledges, vows, and assurances in a way that has big consequences for the social and political domains." The first of the great divine promises is to Abraham. It's 1800 BC, give or take, and God chooses a pagan from Ur, now southern Iraq, and promises him a new country, the so-called Promised Land, innumerable descendants, that's the Israelites, and then God promises that Abraham and his nation will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. You can check all that out in Genesis chapter 12.

Then there are these potential roadblocks to the promises, like when God asks Abraham to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice, which would completely destroy the promise about descendants. It's a really difficult story tucked away in Genesis chapter 22, and maybe we'll deal with it at length in an episode down the track. But basically I read the whole narrative as a critique of child sacrifice, a practice we know was common in Abraham's city of origin, Ur. This scene is a way of ultimately teaching that God, not the worshiper, is the one who provides the sacrifice. Anyway, this all sets up a crucial pattern in the Bible, and in the biblical way of thinking about life and politics, God's promise, a threat to the promise, humans trusting the promise nonetheless, and God fulfilling his promise. The theological word for all of this is covenant, a kind of social contract grounded in trust.

Okay, famously God makes a covenant with Abraham, and covenant becomes a huge theme through the Bible, and you reflect on it. Can you briefly outline for us the social theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes, because you think the Bible's covenant idea exposes these political theories as, and I'm quoting you, "Reductive heresies of a more biblical concept." Okay, tell me about Rousseau and Hobbes, and then how does the Bible expose them as heresies?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Okay, I'm smiling because this sounds like-

John Dickson:

I'm asking him about two of the paradigmatic early modern political philosophers, the Englishman Thomas Hobbes, 1588 to 1679, and the Frenchman, or Genevan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712 to 1778. Both of them influenced our world in profound ways.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I'm smiling because this sounds like an exam question, doesn't it? Rousseau and Hobbes, discuss. Okay, so you can think of Rousseau and Hobbes as two extremes of the options available in modernity for thinking about society. So on one hand you've got Hobbes who says our fundamental way of existing, he calls it the state of nature, is that life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, and we are selfish and

fearful, and unless there's some absolute sovereign, some absolute ruler to rule over us, we're going to have a war of all against all. And so we need a tyrant, he calls it Leviathan, in order to keep us in check and keep us afraid. So that's a pessimistic view of how society works.

Rousseau comes along about 100 years later, 1755, and writes his second discourse, Discourse on Inequality, where he's got a very different picture of the state of nature. So he says people are fundamentally living really nicely with each other, until society comes along and wrecks everything, and this is where you get man is born free and everywhere is in chain in The Social Contract. So either fundamentally we're getting on really well and society stuffs things up, or fundamentally we're at war with each other and society is the only thing that saves us.

And you got these two views of society again at war with each other in the modern world, so some people think the only way to keep people in check is you need a strong authority, and other people say, no, no, no, you just need to let people free, get rid of all authority, people will be fine, all you need is to educate people more and society will be wonderful. And I think that the Bible, again, sees both of these as partial pictures of a much more complex truth that had been ripped away from the truth.

So God is all powerful, so with Hobbes the Bible is a Hobbesian in picture of society. No, no, no, because God makes, he doesn't just terrorize people into doing what he wants, he makes a covenant with Abraham, and in Genesis 15 it's God himself who puts his neck on the line, basically, and says, I am going to hold myself to these promises, to bless you, to make you a great nation, that's my job, I'm going to come through for you. Leviathan does not do that.

So you think, oh okay, so it's a Rousseauian picture then of everybody living happily, but it's not really that either. Rousseau's got this idea called the general will, which is a weird sense of everybody in society will end up wanting the same thing and that'll be the best thing for them. Oh, and by the way, if they don't we've got to force them to be free, and at that point a lot of readers of Rousseau they're whoa, don't like that idea.

But actually the Bible has a version of that, and I don't know if Rousseau has this in the back of his mind or not, but as people are brought into the Kingdom of God our hearts are changed, as Ezekiel says, "God takes away our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh so that our desires are now different and brought into line with the kingdom."

And so Rousseau, if you like, is taking elements and shards of this biblical truth of what it means to live in a kingdom where everybody is harmoniously loving and praising God, and he's trying to secularize that as best he can, and Hobbes is taking other elements of God's relationships and trying to secularize that. But neither of them get the beauty, I guess or the wonder of covenant, which is that the all powerful God of the universe would humble himself enough to make promises and put his neck on the line to bless his creatures. And in a sense it's not Hobbes and Rousseau together, it's the wonderful reality of which Hobbes and Rousseau each get a tiny little bit.

John Dickson:

Yes, and listeners will already have picked up in several of your answers to my questions. A very important theoretical tool for you that you call something like diagonalization. Is this just a weak, indecisive compromise between two bold perspectives? Or I'm sure you think it's something more important.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Indeed I do, yes. I think when it's under, and it is often understood, as oh well you're just taking the two options out there and you're trying to split the difference and end up in the middle and be nice to everybody. And again, I'd want to go back to 1 Corinthians 1 and say that's not what Paul is doing with Greek wisdom, and what I'm trying to do is follow him and do what he's doing, and I'm trying to follow Augustine and do what Augustine is doing. And what both of them are doing, I think, is saying that there is an absolute antithesis and a complete fulfillment of the different options that are out there in the world.

And so God's reality, I think, is richly complex, and what all societies do is pick parts of that and try and make that into the whole picture. So this often gets cashed out in terms of people talk about the third way, this is a third way of thinking and they say it's all very weak and wishy washy and cardigan slippers

John Dickson:

You're just a moderate.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Exactly, exactly. Well, if Paul is being a moderate in 1 Corinthians 1 then okay, I'm happy to be put in the same bucket. But I think what it's doing is showing that this is actually the first way, so God comes up with this rich picture of reality, and then people pinch bits of it and forget the rest and try and make that the whole picture, and that's why you get these oppositions, and that's why I call them in the book reductive heresies. So there's something about them that resembles God's truth, but it's part of it, and then it's isolated and blown up to make it sound as though it's the whole.

And so what you need to do to critique that is not say, well here you've got one side, here you've got the other, let's just find a place in the middle, that's a Greek way of thinking, that's the Aristotelian golden mean, as John Stott really hopefully points out, I think in Christ The Controversialist, where he says, "Now what we need is a both and way of thinking, but that reconnects these heresies to the full orb'd biblical view of things that they were originally wrenched out of."

Voiceover:

From director Cecil B. DeMille.

Charlton Heston:

I will teach thee.

Man shall be ruled by law, not by the will of other men.

Voiceover:

The Academy Award-winning film.

Charlton Heston:

Let my people go.

John Dickson:

That's the official trailer of the 1956 classic *The 10 Commandments*, directed by the master of spectacle himself Cecil B. DeMille. It's one of Hollywood's most enduring biblically themed films, of which there have been quite a few. This pivotal event of the Old Testament demanded a dramatic, expansive, and thrilling retelling, and this movie delivered that in spades, though of course as with other Hollywood adaptations of biblical stories it didn't hit every note with complete accuracy. The film also forever cemented in the public ear the voice of God, the deep, elderly, grumpy voice of God played by Charlton Heston.

Voiceover:

Starring some of film's greatest legends, the greatest epic of all time.

John Dickson:

The central event of the Old Testament is the Exodus from Egypt, and you have some lovely thoughts in the book where you again show that this notion of salvation, in the Exodus, critiques both the modern right and the modern left in their thoughts about freedom and liberation. How so?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I got this originally, so the understanding of the right and the left, from a really interesting book by a social critic called George Lakoff. I think the book is called *Whose Freedom?* And his idea is that there are two fundamentally incompatible ideas of freedom that are circulating in society at the moment. There's the idea on the right, that being free is about being liberated from red tape and the burden of taxes, and so forth, and there's an idea broadly on the left that being free is about being emancipated from oppression of various different kinds. And what both of these ideas of freedom have in common is that to be free, or to be emancipated, means to have no constraints, whether those are constraints of taxation or constraints of oppression, if you get rid of people's constraints, then they'll be free.

And I think that the Bible cuts across both of those, and you can see it really clearly in the Exodus narrative. So if you think about that iconic phrase that's been on the lips of social reformers for centuries, "Let my people go," Martin Luther King Jr., and so forth, it's a rallying cry for get rid of these constraints that are hampering us. It's used seven times in Exodus, and every single time it's followed by something

like, "Let my people go that they may worship me." And so modernity would say, let my people go, that's wonderful, what a rallying cry for freedom, and then they'd read on and say, that they may worship me, oh there's Christians being oppressive again.

But actually I think the Bible is putting its finger on something really interesting, which is that every liberation requires a constraint. So for example, I can't follow my passions unless I park my rationality a little bit, or I can't live by reason unless I don't always impulsively follow my passions. I've got to, in a sense, constrain something in order to let something else free. Tim Keller's got this wonderful example, "I can't play the piano really well unless I practice lots and don't do the other stuff that I could have done while I was practicing." I can't win Wimbledon unless I don't eat pizza every day.

And so I think that the Bible is putting its finger on something fundamental about freedom, that there's always a concomitant constraint. And so the question then becomes not, am I liberated or am I not? But it becomes which freedom and whose constraints have I chosen? And the Bible then says that the way to find the fullness of freedom is to choose the constraints of a God who loved you and who died for you, and who made you and who knows you, rather than, for example, the constraints of a market who wants to maximize the profit it can get out of you and ring you dry, or the impulses that flow one way and then another way.

And I think that's the critique of both of these ideas of freedom, it's not just about what constraints are you getting rid of? It's about what are people worshiping, what are people serving, with that lack of constraint that's been won for them? There's always a new constraint that comes with that worship, I can serve any number of things in my life, but they each come at a cost, and you've got to look at those costs side by side and say which is the wise cost to pay? And I think that's where the Bible comes in and says, well, if you follow a God who loves you, and you follow his law, that's likely to turn out much better for you than if you follow a market who doesn't love you and really doesn't care about you, or if you follow a sense of impulse that's going to blow you one way or another.

John Dickson:

If your head's not spinning already, after the break Chris takes us to the moment when he reckons the Bible explodes a bomb under the assumptions of the modern world. Enter Jesus.

This episode of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan Academic's new book *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, edited by Brian J. Tabb and Andrew N. King. We know that the authors of the New Testament regularly quote and allude to Old Testament passages that are meant to point forward to the presence, person, and work of Jesus. Jesus himself claimed that Moses wrote about him. "If you believed in Moses," Jesus said, "you would believe in me for, he wrote about me." That's John chapter 5.

How exactly the Old Testament writers might have been able to make references to Christ centuries in advance is a matter of extensive debate, and this book brings together the major views and some big thinkers on how the Old Testament points to Christ. This is a book to get your hands on if you're ready to take a closer look at how to read the Old Testament in connection with Jesus Christ. And personally, I reckon this is one of the most compelling things about the Bible. When you discover the uncanny

connection between the beautiful prelude of the Old Testament and the full symphony of the New Testament, it becomes harder and harder to deny that something spooky is going on in these scriptures of the Christians.

We'll be talking to one of the contributors of this book, Tremper Longman, in an upcoming Undeceptions episode, and I can't wait to introduce him to you. In the meantime you can grab *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, edited by Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King, on Amazon right now, or head to [ZondervanAcademic.com](http://ZondervanAcademic.com) for more.

Hi, I'm John Dickson, and it's my pleasure to introduce you to a new member of the Undeceptions Network, it's called DeLorean Philosophy and it's from the brilliant mind and mouth of Steve McAlpine.

Steve McAlpine:

Imagine a DeLorean time machine car appears outside your house this year, and you get in and you're told that you're going to 2052 to see what the future looks like. You arrive, and you see what it actually looks like 30 years from now. Do you want that future? What would you do to get there, or to get away from that future? That's what we're going to find out.

John Dickson:

And that's DeLorean Philosophy with Steve McAlpine. Steve is a super well-known theologian and social commentator here in Australia, and I'm excited to introduce him to the International Undeceptions Network, check out DeLorean Philosophy, full of insightful commentary on the trends shaping our world today and what it means for our lives. Subscribe now and enjoy.

In Tanzania over a third of girls are married before the age of 18. It's often because there aren't many other options. Almost 70% of children aged 14 to 17 in the country aren't enrolled in secondary education, and in a culture that doesn't highly value women, school is a really low priority for them. It's considered much more useful for a girl to be managing the home than traveling the often long distances to go to school, so they're pushed to be a homemaker as soon as possible.

Anglican Aid is working to prevent this. With local Christians in Tarime, in the Mara region of Tanzania, what they're doing is offering local young women an alternative. They want to build the Tarime girls secondary school, which when complete will offer places to about 800 girls, giving them the opportunity to complete their secondary education, keeping them at school, and avoiding young marriages. You can help Anglican Aid in this important work valuing women and championing education. It's an organization I really trust. Go to [AnglicanAid.org.au](http://AnglicanAid.org.au) to give today.

So let's talk about the ministry of Jesus, I want to quote you back to you, and then ask you to unpack it a bit. You say, "The ministry of Jesus is perhaps an under-explored treasure trove of cultural insights for reformed and evangelical Christians. In our haste to develop detailed answers to the question, why did Jesus die? We sometimes forget to ask, how did Jesus live?" Can I ask you two things? Give me a brief rundown of that underrated ministry of Jesus, and then why it's important to biblical critical theory.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Yeah. So I'm not saying that evangelicals and reform people always ignore the ministry of Jesus, of course not, I've heard hundreds of sermons on that topic. But I think what I'm trying to get at there is the idea that if we just rush to the cross to look for the meaning of what Jesus came to earth to do, then we miss a lot of incredibly important resources for helping us understand society and engage with society. So one of them, for instance, would be the idea that the first will be last, which Jesus repeats in his teaching time and again.

Speaker 6:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About 9:00 in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about noon, and about 3:00 in the afternoon and did the same thing. About 5:00 in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'"

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about 5:00 in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it they began to grumble against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have born the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'" Matthew 2:1-16.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

And I think the idea of this overturning, or this upending of the way that the world looks as though it is, and the sense that the way things are now won't determine actually how they end up finally, or what their most important endpoint will be, gives you a very different sense of society. So modernity would say the rich are getting richer and they're using their riches to enjoy themselves, and the poor are by and large getting poorer and they will remain poor.

And then there's a counter reaction to that which tries to validate poverty in and of itself, almost says blessed out of poor because they're poor, rather than blessed of the rich because they've got lots of riches and they can do fun stuff with their riches. And what the first will be blessed does is it cuts across both of those, it says, no, no, no, the rich aren't blessed because they're rich, and the poor aren't blessed

because they're poor, but in terms of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in heart for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

So what I talk about in the book is a nonlinearity there, there's a moment of rupture. The way that things look isn't how they're going to end up. Luther talks about this in terms of the theology of glory, which is things are just going to carry on right as they are, and the rich are going to end up rich and that's great for them, and the theology of the cross, which he sees as a fundamental dislocation between how things look now and how they'll end up. And among the many things that that does, just this one phrase that Jesus keeps repeating, among the many things that it does is it gives you a point from which to critique the way things are. So it allows you to say that the way the world is now is not normative, and that's just one example from Jesus' ministry. The many things that he says, if you tease out the implications of them, they give you a way of looking at society that allows you to see it in a different perspective, makes different things visible in it.

John Dickson:

Well, another example is around the ethic of love. Everyone knows Jesus taught about love. But you, relying on a thought of San Augustine, also see love as a perceptive tool of social and political analysis. How so?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Well, the way that Augustine uses love is he says, in *The City of God*, there are two cities, there's the city of God and the earthly city, and they're intermingled in the present day, so can't always tease apart with precision what's going on in each one. But he says the difference between them is that they're governed by two loves. The city of God is given by the love of God, surprisingly enough, and the earthly city is governed by love of self, and the way that he talks about the difference between those two loves is really, really interesting. So he says the love of God is a public love, by which he means that everybody who loves God loves the same God, the God that's revealed to us in the pages of the Bible. And so if everybody aligns to that love, everybody's going to, in a sense, be increasingly in harmony with each other, because they're all living the same God.

But he says the love self is a private love, and what I think he means by that is that everybody's self is a little bit different, what I want out of life is a little bit different to what you want out of life, and if we just each follow our own desires we're probably going to clash at some point, because we're going to want the same scarce resources. And so the love of self, it actually creates an antagonistic, and in some sense it's a chaotic society, with everybody grasping in competition with each other.

And that, I think, provides, it's one of the ways in which Augustine's idea of love provides a way of looking at society. If everybody is loving themselves fundamentally, that's not going to make for a harmonious, equal, free society. And what this does in terms of social critique, I think, is it moves it to a deeper level than just looking at, say, the economy, or the market, or even politics, party politics, the level at which social critique often goes on. And it says below that, there's a sense in which everybody's

loving something, everybody's got a greatest love, and if we try and approach society on that level of love, I think Augustine's wager is that you get a more subtle critique than if you just look at the different parties and how the economy works.

John Dickson:

In the 1800s archaeologists working on Rome's Palatine Hill, where most of the emperors once lived, uncovered a piece of graffiti scratched into the plaster of a wall of what might have been a servant's quarters, or perhaps a classroom, maybe even a holding cell of some kind, were not exactly sure. Anyway, the crude drawing, about 50 centimetres by 30 centimetres, shows a crucified man with a donkey's head, indicating stupidity. Next to the cross there's a man with arm raised in adoration of the figure on the cross, and below the image, scribbled in very bad Greek, are words [foreign language 00:55:22], Alex worships his God.

Whether it's a guard mocking a Christian prisoner, or a student or servant mocking a friend, it's clearly deriding the beliefs of Christians. It depicts Alex's Lord as a mule-headed loser. In the honour, shame culture of AD 200, the rough date of the graffiti, what else could Jesus' crucifixion have meant? Well to Christians, of course, it meant salvation, beauty, hope, love, but that's upside down thinking in the ancient world. That kind of self-sacrificing humility only came to seem like right side up thinking under the influence of the Christian story. I know that sounds like a big call, something a Christian apologist might say, but actually there are whole books on that topic, and maybe we'll do an episode on it.

Can you unpack for us why you see the death of Jesus on the cross as simultaneously the centre of Christian salvation and a profound socio-political critique?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I think the answer to both of those comes in Philippians 2. Remember that wonderful passage about how Christ, being in very nature God, didn't think that equality with God was something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the nature of a servant, and so forth. And you can think about that passage as a sort of V-shape, that Christ descends to the cross, which is the apex, or the crux, if you like, of that passage, and then God exalts him on the other side. And I think one thing that that passage shows is that the cross is right at the centre of God's plan of salvation, it is the moment where things turn, if you like, where Christ's humbling stops and his exaltation begin. And of course there's much more to say about the cross, I'm not suggesting that that is a full logged idea of what the cross is, but I just want to focus on this passage.

But there's a really, really interesting thing that happens, is that the subject of the verb changes. So Christ humbles himself, Christ becomes a servant, you get to the cross, and then it's God exalts him. Well that's interesting. So why doesn't Christ exalt himself? There's a rupture there at that point, and it's not Christ saying, well, if I humble myself a little bit then eventually I'm going to be able to exhort myself and I'll be the wonderful ruler of the world and so the cross is just the means to the end of becoming really powerful, that's how some people read the cross. I think what this very obvious change of subject in

Philippians 2 says is that that's not how it worked. And so it gives you a different sense of possibility and a different sense, if you like, of success politically and socially.

So we've got these two ideas, if you make much of yourself you will get on in life. Put yourself forward, puff out your chest, knock out all the competition and you'll win, which is peak modernity, if you like. And then you've got this other idea, if you humble yourself you're going to get all walked over, like a doormat. So put yourself forward and win, humble yourself and lose. Philippians 2 gives you a new paradigm which is humble yourself and win, if you like, in the end. It messes around with our sense of what is possible in the world, and introduces ideas that get taken up in society's influence by Christianity like the people who lead as being our servants. That is really weird. Where did that come from? Odysseus, Achilles, all the Assyrian kings, They're not servants. They're many things, but they are not servants.

And so the idea that the greatest in society should be the least, that the people who run the government should be called ministers, because they serve us, that's picking up on this subversive paradigm of you can win, in a sense, by being humble, and that's the different way of looking at society, the really counterintuitive and subversive way of looking at the society that the cross gives you, I think.

John Dickson:

And this is what Augustine was getting at in The City of God, the original critical theory. "By humility," he wrote, "we reach a height, a height not grasped by human arrogance, but granted by divine grace, which transcends all these earthly pinnacles that totter with the shifts of time." He's saying one city will remain, one city is eternal. It's not Rome, it's the humble Kingdom of God.

Let's move to the end of the biblical narrative, and therefore a biblical critical theory, and talk about eschatology, last things. The Bible teaches that there's a final judgment and, on the bright side, a wonderful kingdom. I want to take both of those in turn, firstly judgment and hell. Why is that not just more violence, and therefore a terrible teaching point for Christians in the world who will believe in violence because of that violence in hell?

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

Absolutely. The penny dropped for me on this, and this is something that absolutely I've wrestled with, hell is a very weighty and a doctrine that no one breezes past, basically is it, it sits heavily.

The penny dropped for me when I read Miroslav Volf, is a theologian who's working at Yale University at the moment, and he also lived through the war in Yugoslavia and saw many, heard of many atrocities, and lived through that terrible moment in the history of that part of the world. And he writes about this in a book called Exclusion and Embrace, and he says that for him, and for people who have been through that sort of horror, who've lived through people's throats being slit, and so forth, that the knowledge that there will be an exhaustive justice done at the end of time, that everybody who's done evil will face complete justice, and it'll be perfect, and it won't be too much and it won't be too little, the knowledge

of that means that we don't need to bring perfect justice here and now, that we don't need to hunt down and kill everybody who's a killer.

We should still work for justice, of course, it doesn't mean that we just sit back and put our feet up and say, God sort it out in the end, absolutely not, that's not what he says. But he says we don't need to enforce absolute justice as a condition of there being any justice in the present, and what that means is that you break the cycle of violence. So the problem with trying to bring perfect justice now is that you just keep going around in a circle, and see this in the Israel-Palestine conflict, you see it in all conflicts around the world.

And he says the way to put the brakes on violence, the way to cut the chain and to stop that cycle of violence is to know that there is a perfect justice coming, that God will right all wrongs, that no one will get away anything, whether it's a murder or a lie, whatever it is, justice will be done, everything will be brought out into the open, and people will get what they deserve. And he says that doesn't make you more violent now, and I think this resonates, I haven't lived through anything like that, so I'm deferring to him who has, but it resonates, doesn't it? If you know that perfect justice is coming, you don't need to bring perfect justice now.

There's a play by Albert Camus in English called *The Just Assassins* where he's wrestling with this idea of someone who doesn't believe in God, and the play is set around a group of freedom fighters, and they're trying to bring justice now, and they're trying to work out, should they put a bomb in the carriage of the leader of the nation that they think is oppressing everybody? And as it happens these kids, this leaders' kids are in the carriage, and they really struggle with it. And there's one character called Stepan who at one point says something like, "Look, either perfect justice comes now, or it never comes, forget about it. We've got to bring justice now because otherwise there's no justice."

And I think what Volf is putting his finger on really powerfully is that those are not the only two options, there can be a perfect justice that's coming that means we don't need to bomb the carriage now in order to make things just. But that doesn't mean that we just sit back, it means that we work for justice, but we don't feel the need to make it perfect and exhaustive in the present.

John Dickson:

We all already have a critical theory. This is not just some rarefied academic thing, all of us are shaped by the particular assumptions, preferences, and goals of our blip in the historical story, whether Ancient Rome or 21st century Chicago. The way we look at the world and live in it is influenced decisively by the key social influences in our life, the family we came from, our education or income level, the friends we mix with, the suburb we live in, the media we absorb, and the podcasts we listen to. And this process of socialization is so subtle, yet complete, it's difficult to think objectively about our way of looking at the world, to discern which parts of our culture are true and good, and which parts are accepted by us simply because we're accustomed to them.

So Chris says the choice isn't between adopting a critical theory or not adopting one, the choice is which critical theory will we live by? "Going through life without acknowledging the theoretical assumptions

and commitments that already shape us is like allowing a stranger to decorate our house," he says, "choose our wardrobe, drive our car, and so on, all without our permission. Only a critical theory, a coherent good critical theory, can break the spell and give us clarity." More than that, and quite unlike some critical theories today, biblical critical theory offers not just a critique and negation of structures, but a positive vision that leads to joy. And as Chris puts it, "Heartfelt praise."

You end your account of biblical critical theory by suggesting that the Bible's narrative should ultimately lead to praise, wonder, and worship. I can imagine some people thinking that a mode of spiritual celebration is the antithesis of the rational rigor that's required in this moment, and the seriousness that we need in the world's problems, and you just want to be off happy praising God.

Dr. Christopher Watkin:

I do want to be off praising God, but I don't think that's the denial of seriousness. We, as human beings, are both rational and emotional, aren't we? And if we want to take human beings seriously, then we need to take us as we are, which is we are both we think rationally and we have emotions. And I think to say that to be serious is to deny half of that is not to take human beings seriously. This idea of poetic expression and praising God, being some useless appendage that we need to get rid of to be serious about the world, I think just misunderstands what the Bible is talking about and what human beings are.

So if, for example, my family were drowning in the sea and you saved them, and then I came up to you and I said, "John, thank you for saving my family, it's a good thing to do, goodbye." You would think there's something deficient in that very rational, now thank you was appropriate, very rational response. We would want something more to recognize the enormity of what's just happened, you'd want me to search for some language that tries to do justice to the fact that my family were dying, and now they're saved, and you've done it. You'd want me to make a bit of an effort with my language, and with my emotions, at that point.

And I think that's what the Bible does when it breaks out in praise, it says something huge has happened in reality, and if we just say, oh, fair enough, then we're not being serious about it because we haven't registered the magnitude of what's happened. And to register the magnitude requires emotion, because that's who we are, and it requires thinking carefully about the language that we use in trying to grasp at the enormity of this reality with the language that we use, and that's where you get the language of praise coming in. So to turn the tables on the question, you cannot be serious without being emotional, without turning to praise.

John Dickson:

If you like what we're doing here, please head to Apple Podcast and give us a review. Apparently it really helps. And go to [Undeceptions.com](http://Undeceptions.com) and pick up one of our t-shirts from the store. If you really like us, click donate while you're there, help us cover the costs of each episode, I'd really appreciate it. And while you're there, send us a question and I'll try and answer it in our next Q&A.

Next episode, well, it'll be our new season. I'm just back from the UK collecting a bunch of fantastic interviews about C.S. Lewis, conservatism, atheism, virginity, true story, the Byzantine Empire, and much more. Between now and next season I'll be moving to Chicago, deo volente, to take up a chair at Wheaton College where I'll get to teach in my intellectual happy places, as well as continue to write, speak, and of course, podcast. Oh, and we have some very cool Undeceptions video projects coming down the pipeline soon, so I'd better get cracking, see ya.

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley CJ Payne and directed by Mark Ryan Pierce Hadley. Editing by Richard Hamwi, social media by Sophie Hawkshaw, administration by Lyndie Leviston. Our librarian is Siobhan McGuinness, special thanks to our series sponsors Zondervan Academic for making this Undeception impossible. Undeceptions is the flagship podcast of Undeceptions.com, letting the truth out.

Mark Hadley:

Good thing you're going to another country.

Kaley Payne:

I like mine, but yours, [inaudible 01:10:51].

Mark Hadley:

There are so many other West Wing characters.

John Dickson:

But only one of them is voted the most annoying character on The West Wing. Oh, sorry mate.

Mark Hadley:

No, no.

John Dickson:

You know I love you.

An Undeceptions podcast.