

## **Review: Chris Watkin – Biblical Critical Theory**

“This might be the most significant contribution to Christian cultural engagement since Augustine’s City of God”, declared one commentator at the book launch of Biblical Critical Theory. Chris Watkin’s new release is endorsed by the likes of John Dickson, Esther Nightcap Meek, Michael Horton and Tim Keller. Richard Cunningham says, “This is truly the book I have long wanted to read and I believe it deserves to become a standard text for all Christian leaders, teachers, evangelists and any serious-minded believers”. This is high praise for a book to live up to.

Comparisons between Watkin’s book and City of God are not coincidental. Watkin was inspired by City of God and the structure of his book is reminiscent Augustine’s own biblical cultural theory. As Watkin says, “In the City of God Augustine does not merely explain the Bible to Roman culture, he explains Roman culture to within the framework of the biblical story”.<sup>1</sup> Watkin attempts to do something very similar, explaining contemporary (especially Western) culture through the lens of biblical theology.

Watkin explains that every ‘critical theory’, from feminism to marxism and critical race theory, shares a common goal – to provide a totalising explanation of culture. The Bible has its own totalising explanation of culture. There is a *biblical* critical theory. This means two things. First, it means that the Bible has real and relevant explanatory power. As the subtitle of the book says, “the Bible’s unfolding story makes sense of modern life and culture”. Further, it means that the biblical worldview can interact with other critical theories, on their own terms. Watkin proceeds to demonstrate these two qualities.

### **Biblical Critical Theory *explains* culture**

Biblical Critical Theory presents key ideas from Christian doctrine and applies them to issues of culture. From the Trinity and creation to sin, covenant, prophecy and resurrection, Watkin shows how the biblical narrative *explains* culture.

- The Trinity explains the value of the individual and the collective.

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 31

- The Christian concept of Sin explains why history refuses to neatly divide into ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’.<sup>2</sup>
- Biblical prophecy illuminates the relationship between power, responsibility and speech.<sup>3</sup>
- The doctrine of resurrection provides a unique understanding of social and personal transformation.

The book contains dozens more connections between doctrine and culture, and this brief list of one-sentence summaries does not do justice to Watkin’s own lucid arguments. Further, although I use the word ‘doctrine’, Watkin does not limit himself to formulaic principles. He bravely wades into biblical narrative, discussing Lamech, Abraham, Moses, Wisdom literature and the Gospels. Watkin builds his biblical critical theory from this rich collection of stories and ideas. I admire this approach. It would have been much simpler to make contrived connections between ‘doctrine’ and culture, but instead Watkin chooses to respect the nuance and complexity of the Bible. Watkin refuses to settle for a watered-down version of the Christian worldview and instead demonstrates how the *whole* Bible can explain culture.

### **Biblical Critical Theory engages with other explanations of culture**

Biblical Critical Theory shows how the Christian worldview can engage with other critical theories. ‘Diagonalization’, a term coined by Watkin, explains the nature of this relationship. A biblical critical theory can ‘cut across’ dichotomies and provide an alternative and satisfying solution. Watkin applies this idea of ‘diagonalization’ to a range of culture issues, or ‘figures’ — eg. language, power, tradition, science, beauty, freedom, autonomy. For example, Watkin addresses the ‘Nature vs Improvement’ dichotomy, pertinent to current hot-topics such as genetic enhancement. Some critical perspectives claim that ‘any and every human “improvement” is permitted’. Others believe that, ‘No human improvement is permitted’.<sup>4</sup> Watkin argues that the biblical critical theory ‘diagonalises’ this dichotomy, rejecting both extremes. According to Biblical anthropology, ‘We do not own ourselves’.<sup>5</sup> Yet the Creation narrative reminds us of our duty to ‘cultivate, steward and care’.<sup>6</sup> The Christian therefore, can reject the dichotomy and ask more nuanced questions, “what would count as an improvement that goes beyond the bounds of our

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<sup>2</sup> pp. 128

<sup>3</sup> pp.298-300

<sup>4</sup> pp.92

<sup>5</sup> pp.92

<sup>6</sup> pp. 92

creatureliness?”<sup>7</sup> Watkin does not offer answers to these questions, but he does show a biblical critical theory tends to ‘cut across’ the dichotomies offered by other critical theories. When applying ‘diagonalisation’, Watkin often begins by identifying the ‘common grace’ on each side of the dichotomy. Watkin is generous toward other critical theories, showing how a biblical critical theory can help make sense of these views, offering fulfilment and even unification.

Watkin argues that ‘diagonalization’ is more than mere compromise. For example, in the dichotomy of ‘loveless-justice’ and ‘justiceless-love’, biblical critical theory does not settle for ‘part justice and part love’.<sup>8</sup> Instead, “diagonalization presents a Biblical picture in which the best aspirations of both options are fulfilled, but not in a way that the proponents of those options would see coming”.<sup>9</sup> In practice, this principle is ambiguous. When applying ‘diagonalization’ to a variety of cultural issues throughout the book, it seems that Watkin does offer more than mere compromise, and yet it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what ‘more’ is offered. I suspect that it is Watkin’s analytic precision and pastoral wisdom which allows him to properly use the tool of ‘diagonalization’. I do not feel confident that I could apply the concept with equivalent finesse.

Watkin engages with culture genuinely yet generously. The term ‘critical theory’ strikes fear among some Christians. Critical theories seek to corrode the philosophical foundations and social authority of Christianity . . . don’t they? Watkin brings a refreshing and demystifying perspective. Critical theories are simply attempts to explain culture holistically. The Bible does this too. Christians have always had things to say about language, relationships, power, beauty and other cultural ‘figures’. The biblical worldview can be understood as a kind of critical theory, which both contrasts and fulfils all other theories. Every other critical theory falls short — and yet these theories contain echoes, distorted as they may be, of the biblical story.

Watkin, describing Augustine’s great work, says, "*The City of God* provides us with a blueprint for cultural engagement in our own day that’s both biblically faithful and culturally sensitive. Its brilliance has been frequently imitated but never surpassed”.<sup>10</sup> Watkin’s own Biblical Critical Theory is certainly one of these ‘imitators’ — and a very successful one at that. Biblical Critical Theory highlights the important intersections between the Christian worldview and other prevailing cultural narratives. Watkin provides a ‘blue print for cultural engagement’ by showing us that

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<sup>7</sup> pp. 92

<sup>8</sup> pp.16

<sup>9</sup> pp. 17

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/augustine-city-god-review/>

Christians have real common ground with our cultural neighbours and valuable contributions to make.

### **Should you read it?**

Watkin's book has been extremely well received, and for good reason. I add my commendation. It is a sizeable book which riffs on one central melody. Therefore, if you are intimidated by the length or depth of this text, I would encourage you to use it as a reference book. The introduction and early chapters explain Watkin's thesis while later chapters apply this thesis and describe its implications. I look forward to re-reading these later chapters as I consider particular cultural issues or ideas. Biblical Critical Theory is academically rigorous, beautifully written and offers a constructive way forward for Christian public discourse.