# What Is "WOKE"? Social Justice? or Social Downfall?

**a Brewed Theology conversation starter***

## INTRO

"Woke." What does it mean? It depends on who you ask. Some use "woke" as another four-letter word to describe something they're ideologically opposed to, or uncomfortable with. Others might suggest that being "woke" is necessary to acknowledge injustice in the world. Still others (probably many, perhaps including you) accept or reject being woke because they've been told to be (or not). We might suggest defining "woke" by it's opposite: *asleep.* (But what does *that* even mean? Good question.)

While precisely defining "woke" is a challenge (as our Homework sources will suggest), there's a lot to be said about this now-mainstream term – its roots, its use, and what's at stake in how it is used.

This Brewed Theology lesson explores the origins of "woke" and how its meaning has been reshaped through political rhetoric. You are invited to enter this homework and conversation open-minded, setting aside the issues and assumptions assigned as "woke," and learning about the term anew. This conversation examines who and what is being targeted and harmed in the "anti-wokeness" movement and, finally, challenges participants to suggest ways or methods for dialogue to address issues in the woke/anti-woke debate beyond the divisiveness of "us" versus "them."

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

How would you define "woke"? Do you have a positive or negative connotation with the word "woke"? Why? Think: where, and from what sources, have you heard that term? When was the last time you heard something called "woke"? Have you ever been called "woke"? Have you called something (or someone) else that? How did it come across? How was it intended? What social issues are important to you? What is something you wish your family, friends, neighbors, community, or country would "wake up" about? How would you raise awareness about an issue important to you? Is that process "woke" or something else? Read the "Bible Basics" below. Would the prophets or Jesus be considered "woke"? Why, or why not?

## BIBLE BASICS

- **Deuteronomy 27:19** - God's people are entering the Promised Land after their 40-year wandering. Moses delivers his swansong sermon. Toward its climax, he outlines a series of blessings and curses for their collective life. This is #5 of the curses.
- **Jeremiah 22:3** – The Prophet Jeremiah speaks for God, calling attention to injustice. Woke?
- **Micah 6:8** - The Prophet Micah speaks for God, calling for justice, mercy, and humility. Woke?
- **Matthew 22:36-40** – Jesus: love God, love people. Greatest (and second greatest) commandments.
- **Luke 4:16-21** – - Jesus' inaugural sermon. Very justice oriented. (Bonus: keep reading.)
- **Matthew 24:42-44** & **Matthew 25:31-46** – Read these together. Jesus says "keep awake" for the Lord's coming, and at that time, nations will be judged by treatment of the poor. Is this "woke"?

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# ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

## WHAT DOES 'WOKE' REALLY MEAN? (4-minute listen)

In this 2023 piece from the presidential primary season for 2024, Domenico Montanaro from NPR News interviews Elaine Richardson, professor of literacy at the Ohio State University. Its origins may be surprising.

## TRYING (AND FAILING, AND TRYING AGAIN) TO DEFINE "WOKE"

When author Bethany Mandel was asked to define "woke" during an interview (promoting her book critiquing "woke" education), she floundered in what became a viral moment. Read this *Forbes* article that includes a number of attempted definitions, critiques, and suggestions about defining "woke."

## EXAMINING THE HISTORY OF "WOKE" (4-minute video)

Trymaine Lee provides a concise overview of the origins of 'woke' dating back to the Jim Crow South and how political rhetoric has reshaped its meaning and interpretation. Pay attention to how you find yourself reacting to the story and images, and think about why.

## WAS JESUS "WOKE"? THIS PASTOR THINKS SO

Read this blog, in which Pastor Adam Ericksen (from Clackamas United Church of Christ in Milwaukie, OR) offers a definiton of "woke" and a take on how that term might describe Jesus' mission and teachings.

## IS "WOKE SUPREMACY" A PROBLEM?

Senator Tim Scott from South Carolina took flack when he suggested in an interview that "'woke supremacy' is as bad as white supremacy." Scott critiques the "tolerant" political left's intolerance for dissent, and states that "toxic woke mandates and virtue signaling create discrimination" instead of equality and opportunity. Read a description of that comment with some definitions at *Newsweek*.

## OVERCOMING DIVISIONS, BRAVELY?

*Braver Angels* is an organization dedicated to civil political debate and dialogue. In this article (on *Braver Angels'* own website), political scientist, policy analyst, and writer Michael Harrington offers a review of the advantages and disadvantages of the *Braver Angels* format. Also! please read the response in the comments by Jay Bassett, below Harrington's article, dated 12/08/2024.

# BONUS STUFF (for the overachievers)

## HOW WOKE WENT FROM "BLACK" TO "BAD" (~9-minute read)

In this article, Ishena Robinson, Deputy Editorial Director for the Legal Defense Fund, notes similarities in how 'woke' and other terms from the black lexicon have been similarly appropriated and asks, "… when legislators pass a law to 'stop woke' in light of the word's true history as well as its commonly understood meaning, what are they really saying?" A critique of anti-woke sentiment and legislation.

## "LEVI WOKES" (2.5-minute video)

A Saturday Night Live satirical ad for "woke" jeans. What does the ad (and its existence) say about "woke"?

*We at Brewed Theology claim no authorship or ownership of suggested readings, the links provided, or their host websites. Links below connect to their original sources. If a link is broken, please contact your facilitator or report it to brewedtheology@gmail.com. Homework readings are proven (at least in our minds) to boost thoughtfulness and conversation. While not required, they are highly suggested.*

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