

Are We Happy Yet?

Thoughts on Trueman's Insightful Book

By DANIEL ZEKVELD

As a young child, I learned the acronym JOY: Jesus, Others, You. The point was that our focus should remain in that order, with Jesus, then others, coming before the self. But modern society has flipped that on its head. The self is all-important. Jesus and others are either less prominent or entirely absent from consideration.



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In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman asks why the phrase “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” has come to be seen as a normal, coherent statement. Just a few decades ago, North Americans would have been baffled by such a statement. This statement requires a very

specific notion of the self, one which is unique to modern society and which affects each one of us.

Our society’s focus on pleasure and instant gratification, and the associated rejection of sexual morality, has been influenced by the sexual revolution in the 1960s. But Carl Trueman makes a compelling argument that it comes more broadly from a deeper revolution in how we understand the self. Trueman offers a valuable perspective on our individualistic society, the dangers it presents for the Church, and how Christians ought to respond to it.

INDIVIDUALISM: REPLACING GOD

Throughout most of Western history, society was built on objective foundations and standards of truth found in God’s Word. The world was seen as ordered by God, and human nature and life could not be explained without God. However, throughout the 18th century there was a radical shift as people tried to explain the world without God.

Instead of God creating us in a particular way, for a particular purpose, Trueman says that in modern society, “we are who we choose to be, who we choose to make ourselves” (p. 176). As our society increasingly relies on technological advances, we are better able to create the illusion that we control our own existence.

For example, medicine seeks to change moral problems into medical problems. Contraceptives, abortion, and other medical interventions remove the “consequences” of sex. Doctors can now “change” a person’s sex from male to female, or at least give the outward illusion that they have done so. Medical and technological advancements have given many a way to replace God with perceived control of our own circumstances. Of course, this temptation is nothing new, reflecting the original sin of Adam and Eve in the garden when they ate the fruit and wanted to be “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5).

EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

To explain his view of the self, Trueman uses the term “expressive individualism,” a term borrowed from the philosopher Charles Taylor. By this term, he means “that each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires” (p. 46). Trueman goes on to discuss the idea of the therapeutic; the idea that people simply need to be happy and pursue their desires openly. This requires not only tearing down biblical morality, but also creating new definitions of morality so that people do not feel judged or rejected. And “where a sense of psychological well-being is the purpose of life, therapy supplants morality – or, perhaps better, therapy is morality – and anything that achieves that sense of well-being is good, as long as it meets the rather weak condition that it does not inhibit the happiness of others, or that of a greater number of others” (p. 360).

Since what matters is simply what makes people feel good, the law must also be transformed to make people happy. If people find their identity in their sexuality, the society around those people must also affirm their sexuality in order to make them happy. The law must also be transformed to achieve the greatest happiness for these individuals. This idea of the self helps us to better understand the outrage of society when a baker refuses to bake a cake for a same-sex couple, or a videographer refuses to film a same-sex wedding, or a doctor refuses to provide abortion or euthanasia. These are seen as moral criticism of something a person “needs” to make them happy and to be fulfilled.

The impact of this view can be seen in recent attempts to combat hate speech in Canada. Speech which makes a moral conclusion about another person’s actions is now seen as violent, because it is denying someone the ability to find meaning according to their feelings and desires. Simply failing to recognize or affirm someone’s sexual choices can be seen as victimizing that person. “The struggle to cultivate the right form of political consciousness or psychology means that things such as education and speech need to be carefully regulated in order to ensure the correct outcome” (p. 251). When man has replaced God, the so-called correct outcome is whatever man decides it is.

INDIVIDUAL ORIENTATION

Prior to the age of individualism, the commitment of individuals was directed outward, towards beliefs, practices, or larger institutions; towards one’s duty to those around them. Today, however, that is reversed. Outward institutions are seen as servants of the individual’s feelings and desires. As a result, institutions need to be transformed so that they conform to whatever individuals want to make them. Take mainstream churches in Canada,



for example, which increasingly preach a message that makes attendees feel good rather than preaching the gospel and convicting men of sin. Another example is families which become whatever individuals want them to be, with various “types” of marriages and parenting arrangements and laws which facilitate them.

Our society increasingly demonizes various “oppressive” structures which people need to be freed from. Institutions are seen as the facilitators of that oppression. Within this viewpoint, the traditional family trains children to be submissive to authority and to comply with moral structures. But for the expressive individual, “the dismantling and abolition of the nuclear family are essential if political liberation is to be achieved” (p. 235). Because society has rejected God, it no longer values the institutions which God has given, but seeks to destroy them as oppressive institutions.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Trueman does not spend much time on how Christians should respond to these developments, instead choosing to explain how we have gotten where we are as a society. Yet, he does touch briefly on the dangers for Christians. We too are expressive individuals, and too often we are symptoms of the society and culture around us. Because of our

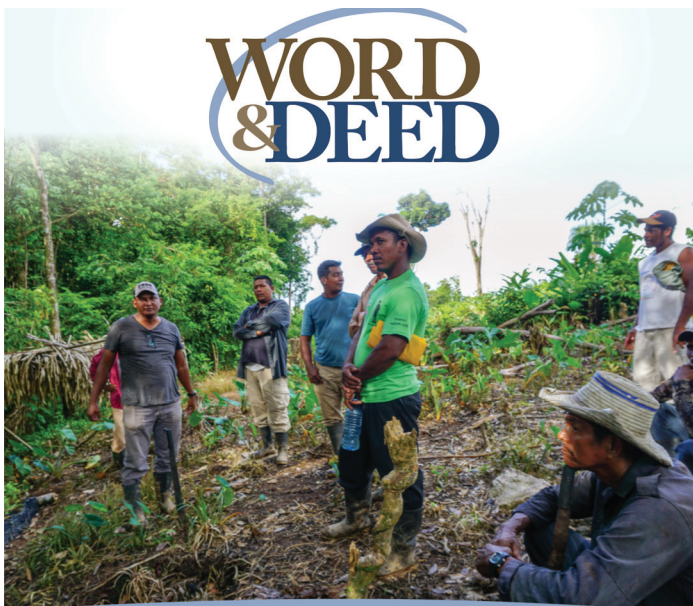
surroundings, we too are forced to make choices that previous generations did not have to make. In a sense, we ‘choose’ our religion, within which we have a vast number of options in terms of denomination and style. We choose our career, often based on what will be fulfilling for us as individuals. In Christian families, husbands and wives choose their roles much more than they have even in the recent past.

Having and making these decisions are not necessarily bad things. But so easily we substitute God for something less; we replace the Creator with created things. We want to feel good about ourselves, so we create our own morality and structure. We want to be our own individual people, so too often we find our identity in our feelings and desires rather than in biblical truth. We need to make choices in so many details of our lives, but we must be sure to choose rightly. A society grounded simply on the whims of individuals cannot last for long. We need to replace our perception of self as all-important with the knowledge that who we are and what we ought to do is grounded in God and in the truth of His Word.

IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONS

We cannot change the tide of culture alone. While our society seeks to tear down biblical institutions, we can seek to re-establish their importance. Most importantly, the instituted Church must act as the Body of Christ, as a community. We are shaped by the communities to which we belong, especially the stronger communities. “And that means that the church needs to be the strongest community to which we each belong.” We can be individually concerned about the problems we see around us, but we must also respond as a community, a community shaped by biblical worship and biblical truth.

Likewise the institution of the family. Various forces in society seek to destroy the traditional family because it presents a biblical moral structure that confronts them with their sin. We must in response prioritize and pray for strong families which shape us and our children to respond to our culture. Trueman explains that, especially through the LGBTQ movement and the rise of feminism in the 19th century, the traditional concept of the family has broken down. Men and women sought to break free from the supposed oppression of the traditional family and to be able to control themselves and their choices. The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society, and biblical



And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Colossians 3:17

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families can be communities that respond to the individualism of our age.

We are rational, individual people. But we are also socially embedded in institutions and communities. Although Trueman presents the dangers of individualism, he does not speak explicitly of institutions and their importance. In a book titled *On Thinking Institutionally*, Hugh Heclo argues that we need to think of ourselves not as individuals, but within the broader picture of the institution(s) we are a part of. It's not about satisfying ourselves and our own desires, but about doing what is right as moral actors who make choices. As church members, family members, employees, etc., we must think not only of ourselves, but about those around us and what is best for the institutions we participate in. But Heclo also notices the severe harms of individualism, writing "Dreams of the institutionless, abstract ideal have left human beings vulnerable to the yearning for total revolution, from the French Revolution onward through communism, fascism, and Maoism. The cost of pursuing the collective dream is well over a hundred million lives cut short in the century just past." The search for a type of utopia is as common today as it has been in past centuries. But when people seek to make their world 'better' without the foundation of God and His Word, it only results in ruin.

CONCLUSION

We cannot ignore what is happening around us when it comes to the increased focus on the self, and we cannot think that we are unaffected. Trueman argues that if there is a time in history similar to the time we are now in, it is the second century. "The second-century is, in a sense, our world, where Christianity is a choice – and a choice likely at some point to run afoul of the authorities" (p. 407).

It's so easy for Christians today to think that, as long as the sexual choices of others do not hurt anyone, then who are we to stop them? But that thinking falls into the idea that happiness is all that matters, and that there need not be a foundation for how we act. By focusing so intently on the self, and rejecting objective moral foundations, our society is destroying itself. In community, with our families and churches, we can show the world the blessing of finding meaning in biblical truth. While Canadian society and government seek for answers their own way, God has given us the answers we need through His Word, and we can share those answers with those around us. ♦

Retracing Footsteps

2022 IN REVIEW

By CHRISTINE FARENHORST

Quotes at the beginning of each month are by John Wesley, English Methodist theologian and revivalist preacher (1703-1791).

January 2022

"What one generation tolerates, the next generation will embrace."

DRUG ADDICTION - of heroin and opium rampant in Afghanistan destroying its health and welfare.

BANNED - by France, use of plastic wrap for large vegetables and fruits.

HEAVY FLOODING - in Indonesia kills 9 and displaces 30,000.

\$434,000 - Dr. Anthony Fauci's annual salary, highest paid employee of the US federal govt.

42.6 MILLION - number of abortions in 2021 – leading cause of death.

QUOTE - by Chemi Lhamo, Canadian/Tibetan activist: *"To be cheering on our athletes (in the Winter Olympics) while they're in Beijing, when just outside the stadium there is a genocide being committed against the Uyghurs and the Tibetans is the same as applauding for the Chinese government itself."*

RESUMED - Missile tests in North Korea.

LOCKED DOWN - Xian, city in north central China, barring 13 million from leaving their homes, just before the Olympics.

MASSACRED - 200 plus by bandit group in NW Nigeria.

COVID FACT - by CDC Director Walensky: *"The overwhelming number of Covid deaths, over 75%, occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities."*

STRIPPED OF TITLES - Prince Andrew, fighting a civil sexual assault lawsuit.

ERUPTED - the Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano in Tonga, causing tsunamis across the Pacific.

ALLOWED TO STAND - the Texas heartbeat law.

GOVT. BONUS RECEIVED - by US hospitals for patients admitted and declared Covid positive.

PROMOTED (AGAIN) - by abortion providers, chemical abortion pill RU-486, which starves a baby and causes contractions expelling the infant.

LIFTED - by England and Ireland, virtually all Covid restrictions.

THOUSANDS - of protestors in Canada join