

CBC Sunday School
Understanding Expressive Individualism
January 9, 2022

“the so-called sexual revolution of the last sixty years, culminating in its latest triumph—the normalization of transgenderism—cannot be properly understood until it is set within the context of a much broader transformation in how society understands the nature of human selfhood.... the changes we have witnessed in the content and significance of sexual codes since the 1960s are symptomatic of deeper changes in how we think of the purpose of life, the meaning of happiness, and what actually constitutes people’s sense of who they are and what they are for.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, pp. 20, 23

“The expressive individual... grants his own personal preference the status of universal moral imperatives.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 86

“Human beings may still like to think they believe in good and bad, but these concepts are unhitched from any transcendent framework and merely reflect personal, emotional, and psychological preferences.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 88

I. Discussion Questions

What words would you use to describe our modern American culture? How is that culture reflected in the church?

As far as you can discern, how has that culture shifted from years past? What is better? What is worse?

If you were to share the gospel in Salt Lake City, you would assume you would need some understanding of Mormonism, so as to discuss how the gospel of Jesus connects to or contrasts with their cultural background. How about if you were to share the gospel in Johnson County? What are the defining cultural convictions of those in our area, that would be helpful to understand as we seek to share Christ?

Note: Before we begin these discussions, let us be clear that our goal is not to wallow in the present distress of the world, all the while pining for the better yesteryear. Our world has been broken since Genesis 3, and will be until Jesus returns.¹ Rather, our purpose is to seek some understanding of why our culture is the way it is, so that we may evaluate and address it with gospel witness.

¹ “As for the notion of some lost golden age, it is truly very hard for any competent historian to be nostalgic. What past times were better than the present?” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 30

II. What Is Expressive Individualism?

A. Major Sources

1. The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self by Carl Trueman
2. Expressive Individualism Series at The Gospel Coalition by Trevin Wax
3. How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society by Carl Trueman

B. Exploring Terms

1. The Self

- a. There has been a shift in that we now think of our “selves” primarily in psychological terms, as opposed to place in society, or some other foundation.
- b. Who we feel we are inside is most definitive. More than “outward” traits such as body, or family, or religious or tribal association, or how we contribute to society... the “real” us lies within ourselves, in our psyche, spirit, or heart.
- c. Happiness, well-being, and human flourishing is tied to our inner sense of psychological well-being. Our “mental health” is paramount, and tied to being at peace with our inner selves.
- d. Because who we are inside is most determinative of our life and health, to attack or threaten that inner person in any way is to do damage. An effect of this is that words become violence.
- e. “a highly psychologized era will accord increasing importance to words as means of oppression.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 55

2. Expressive

- a. What is “inside” must be consistently expressed “outside.” It is not only that we are free to express ourselves. Rather, we must express ourselves if we are to be healthy and whole.
- b. The ultimate good for the self is to be “authentic” – to portray outwardly what we feel is true of us inwardly.
- c. The ultimate sin is repression of what is inside; or “inauthenticity.”
- d. Oppression is not just the violation of economic or physical well-being, but the violation of psychological well-being. This is even more threatening.
- e. Our desire for and pursuit of “consistent” expression of our internal selves must not only be tolerated, but accepted and affirmed and validated by the community around us.

3. Individualism

- a. We are ultimately defined not by our family, community, tribe, etc., but are defined by who we are as an individual.
- b. Autonomy and self-determination are valued more than communal ethical qualities such as justice, dignity, altruism, communal contribution, etc.
- c. Only we get to determine what is right for ourselves. Others cannot determine that for us. The individual reigns.
- d. Relationships and social arrangements are judged by how they serve the self.
 - i. Consider our cultural understanding of marriage. We no longer think in terms of what will be good for a community or family, or our obligation to a deity or covenant. People mostly value marriage to the extent that it makes them happy. If it doesn’t, it can be discarded.

4. Expressive Individualism

- a. “each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 46
- b. “Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized.” Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*
- c. “the purpose of life is to find one’s deepest self and then express that to the world, forging that identity in ways that counter whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religious authorities might say.” Trevin Wax, *Expressive Individualism: What Is It?*
- d. “Emerging from the Romantic expressionism of the late eighteenth century, it is an understanding ‘that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity,’ and that we are called to live out (‘express’ it) rather than conform to modes imposed by others (especially institutions).” James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*
- e. “Expressive individualism assumes the authority of inner feelings in what it means to be an individual...” Carl Trueman, *How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society*
- f. “That term suggests not only a desire to pursue one’s own path but also a yearning for fulfillment through the definition and articulation of one’s own identity. It is a drive both to be more like whatever you already are and also to live in society by fully asserting who you are. The capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence by defining their personal identities is increasingly equated with liberty and with the meaning of some of our basic rights, and it is given pride of place in our self-understanding.” Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*
- g. Charles Taylor describes our age as “The Age of Authenticity,” meaning that our culture prioritizes acting not in conformity with an external standard, but in conformity with our own personal desires and values. Being “authentic” is being “who you really are.” Taylor says; “I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.” Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

C. Seven Statements of Belief, from Mark Sayers’ “Disappearing Church”

1. The highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.
2. Traditions, religions, received wisdom, regulations, and social ties that restrict individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed, or destroyed.
3. The world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows. Technology—in particular the internet—will motor this progression toward utopia.
4. The primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone’s self-defined quest for individual

- freedom and self-expression. Any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated. Therefore social justice is less about economic or class inequality, and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity, self-expression, and personal autonomy.
5. Humans are inherently good.
 6. Large-scale structures and institutions are suspicious at best and evil at worst.
 7. Forms of external authority are rejected and personal authenticity is lauded.

D. Popular Culture

1. Common Slogans
 - a. You be you.
 - b. Be true to yourself.
 - c. Be authentic to who you are.
 - d. Follow your heart.
 - e. Find yourself.
2. Movies – Pretty much every Disney film.
 - a. “Let it Go” from Frozen
 - b. “How Far I’ll Go” from Moana

E. Christianity

1. In some places, expressive individualism is being mixed with Christian thinking.
2. The argument starts with the affirmation that God made us in His image, and God made us good, and God made us with good desires and feelings, so we have a right and obligation before God to express what we feel and what is inside. After all, God made us that way.

III. Foundations of Expressive Individualism

A. Philosophical Foundations

1. Rene Descartes – Radical doubt and skepticism, leading to his grounding certainty of truth in the undeniable reality of self-awareness. “I think, therefore I am.” I know I exist, therefore I can know truth and reality exist.
2. Jean-Jaques Rousseau – Humans are born free and innocent, and our morality and innate goodness is corrupted by society. Morality is found in listening to our inner voice and innately good emotional instincts.
 - a. For example, we are born free from hate, but society teaches us to hate others.
 - b. Our corruption doesn’t come from within, but from outside influences.
 - c. We get back to moral and ethical goodness when we listen to our inner selves.
3. Romanticism – Especially concerned with the arts, romanticism emphasized the individual, the emotional, and the inspirational power of the natural world.
 - a. It was in part a reaction against modernity and its emphasis on science, structure, and reason.
 - b. It glorified the natural, and pushed against anything that seemed institutional or inorganic.
 - c. Nature itself has a moral structure within that is uncorrupted, and to which we must return and adhere.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche – Moral standards were really a tool of oppression that the powerful used to disempower others.
5. Karl Marx – Moral standards are a means by which a powerful class preserved the social and economic status quo.
6. Sigmund Freud – Our inner self, our psyche, is interwoven with, dependent upon, and largely determined by sexual desire. Sex is not just an act, but a crucial part of our inner self. Sexual desire is inextricably tied to who we are, and is identity forming.

B. Technological Foundations

1. Transportation – We are increasingly able to determine where we live. Thus, we are not “tied to the land,” or feel as though we are dependent upon a god in heaven to provide. We can pick up and move, and have become the masters of our domain.
2. Home – We have more control than ever over our living situation. Even the advent of heating and air conditioning means we can have mastery over our own “weather.” We can choose comfort, and do not feel the need to plead to God.
3. Communication – Modern media has enabled us to program messaging and entertainment to suit our personal preferences.
 - a. We don’t have to listen to the radio and its programming. We can create our own music playlists.
 - b. Advertising is personalized to a frightening degree. Our digital world is catered to our felt needs and preferences.
4. Work – We can work remotely, and alongside people across the globe. We now have more choice as to where and with whom we work and find employment and meet financial needs. We are not “stuck” with the person next to us for our livelihood. Thus, we no longer have a sense of being critically dependent on another.
5. Social Media – We are both isolated and connected. Social media increasingly allows for us to be independent of one another physically, and not needing to relate or meet needs physically. Yet we are connected in word and mind. Therefore, our relations are increasingly defined in psychological terms, where we get to project an image to be received by the other, and the other has little opportunity to determine or evaluate otherwise.

C. Identity Formation

1. Our identity or sense of belonging is no longer tied to our land, family, tribe, nation, religion, or heritage. Our identity is not rooted externally. It is now rooted in the inner self, manifested in self-determined categories such as sexual identity and gender.
2. Our customizable world tells us that we can customize our “selves” as well. We can make ourselves whoever we want to be. We are not stuck with the hand that we were dealt, but can personalize and customize everything.
3. Again, for anyone to contradict the self we have chosen to be is to do real violence, because our existence is not defined physically but spiritually and psychologically and emotionally.
4. “If the inner psychological life of the individual is sovereign, then identity becomes as potentially unlimited as the human imagination.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 50

“we all live in a world in which it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept... Human nature, one might say, becomes something individuals or societies invent for themselves.” Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, pp. 41, 42

IV. Consequences of Expressive Individualism for the Church

- A. The individual is placed above God.
 - 1. In this mindset, we find purpose and meaning within, not without.
 - 2. Our hearts are more determinative of truth and reality than God’s law/word.
 - a. We are not to conform to God’s standard. We instead shape God to match our own inner convictions and feelings.
 - b. The gospel itself, which says I am a sinner in need of repentance, becomes a word of violence and attack; and actually harmful to our psyche.
 - c. Any transcendent truths or moral laws cannot truly exist, as they must ultimately bow down to expression of the self.
 - 3. Our world becomes centered not on God the Creator and Sovereign, but on us.
 - a. God becomes our servant, existing to meet our needs of expression.
- B. The individual is placed above (and often at odds with) community, and the church.
 - 1. Individual rights take precedence over communal obligations.
 - 2. At the same time, we know an individual must exist in the context of others.
 - a. It is impossible to think of “the self” without thinking in relation to others. The very word “self” implies that there are “others.” By definition we are communal, and we can only imagine ourselves in this light.
 - i. In other words, who we are only has meaning as we relate to others.
 - ii. For example, my native tongue is only meaningful if another can understand it.
 - iii. So, we need others in order to be ourselves. Yet, our world wants
 - b. We have determined that we will prioritize the inner self as supreme. All the while, we know the self must exist in the context of others. This sets up an unavoidable conflict. We need others for our “selves” to be legitimized, while also needing to assert ourselves regardless of others, and not be determined by others.
 - c. So, to maintain the ability to both express and self-determine our identities, we must make the world around us bend to affirm us.
 - d. This is why modern people must not only have their identities tolerated, but affirmed by others. Because we ultimately find our meaning in the external affirmation of our self-determined inner self. Whenever this doesn’t happen, our very selves are threatened.
 - 3. The community has the obligation to affirm the individual, not to correct or train or discipline or form or change.
 - a. When the church challenges us or speaks against our feelings and convictions, it feels wrong, even abusive.
 - b. We will leave churches or communities where we don’t feel affirmed.

4. The church is turned not into a place of worship of God, but a therapy center where our felt needs and desires are to be met.
 - a. The church's role is to aid us in our pursuit of self-exaltation and fulfillment.
 - b. People won't stop going to church. Rather, they will redefine church as something that exists to meet their needs, and "fulfill themselves." When our felt needs are not met, we turn on the church for not affirming our hearts and inclination.
 - c. It may be helpful to note here how this is a natural outflow, or at least corollary, of the seeker-sensitive and church growth movements, in that church has become about catering to the needs of congregants, as opposed to leading congregants to conform themselves to God.
 - d. "Again, expressive individualism does not empty the church of its members. It merely fills the pews with people who see their church attendance as another expression of their identities, an aid in their spiritual pursuit of happiness. The church has limited, if any, real authority. The mighty Me stays enthroned, even when the mighty Me is in a church pew." Trevin Wax, *Why Is Expressive Individualism a Challenge for the Church?*
5. We begin to hate, or at least be suspicious, of any kind of authority. And we deny the authority of our brothers and sisters over us in the church.
 - a. The church becomes an institution to be resisted, or the very least suspected.
 - b. We don't consider how our actions might affect the church, or what our obligations might be to our brothers and sisters in Christ.
6. "That which hinders my outward expression of my inner feelings—that which challenges or attempts to falsify my psychological beliefs about myself and thus to disturb my sense of inner well-being—is by definition harmful and to be rejected. And that means that traditional institutions must be transformed to conform to the psychological self, not vice versa." Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, pp. 49-50
7. Culture "must now serve the purpose of meeting my psychological needs; I must not tailor my psychological needs to the nature of society, for that would create anxiety and make me inauthentic." Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 54

V. Table Discussion

Knowing that we are inevitably impacted by our culture, have you seen aspects of expressive individualism in your own life, home, ministry, etc., or in the church?

"at the heart of our current cultural conflicts lies a shared notion of the self that is transforming our world, from our institutions to our understanding of morality." Carl Trueman, *How Expressive Individualism Threatens Society*