

CBC Sunday School
Analyzing Expressive Individualism
January 16, 2022

“When “Be true to yourself” is the greatest commandment, the failure to be yourself becomes the biggest sin, with the rejection of someone else’s self-expression following close behind.”

Trevin Wax, Caught in the Riptide of Mere Inspiration

I. Discussion Question

Read the following two passages from Genesis and Romans. From these passages, attempt to construct a theology of what it means to be a human person, and say all that you can about a biblical definition of humanity.

Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Romans 5:12, 18

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

II. Basics of Expressive Individualism

- A. Each person has the right to determine who they are for themselves, irrespective of any external control or authority.
- B. The real “self” is determined psychologically – the real you is “inside” and “within.”
- C. Your inward self is good and pure.
- D. Your inward self must be expressed outwardly for you to be healthy, fulfilled, and whole.
- E. Inauthenticity is the great sin toward the self, and is defined as not being true to who you are inside. We are inauthentic when the external self doesn’t reflect the internal.
- F. Others should not only tolerate but affirm the real you that you choose to express.
- G. Repression by outside forces is a/the great threat.
- H. Because our “selves” are determined primarily psychologically, and our sense of self and well-being is derived from within, any threat to our mental well-being is a true, life-damaging attack. Words become violence.

III. Expressive Individualism vs Scriptural Truth

A. Man-Centered vs God-Centered

1. Expressive individualism places humans at the center of all existence.
 - a. In a word, it is idolatrous.
 - b. When this mindset seeps into the church, there is a danger to make all things serve the “betterment” of the human. Ministry becomes purely and merely therapeutic, instead of being redemptive.
2. Scripture places God at the center of all existence.
 - a. This reminds us that our purpose is to serve and worship God.
 - b. Thus, the goal of Christian ministry is to help people be conformed to God in Christ, and therein find life, fulfillment, joy, peace, etc.

B. Self-Expression vs Self-Denial

1. The basis of expressive individualism is self-expression and affirmation. A pillar and foundation of our Christian walk is self-denial. See Matthew 16:24.
2. We follow Jesus, whose pursuit was not to glorify Himself, but to deny Himself for the sake of others.
3. All Christians are called to deny themselves; whether that be in the area of sexual desire, career ambition, family priorities, or any other earthly pursuit.
 - a. We are called to deny all things within us that are contrary or competition to Jesus Christ.
 - b. It is not the case that only certain people/sinners are called to self-denial. All Christians share this. If you are not denying self to follow Jesus, you may not be truly following Jesus.

C. Sin as Inauthenticity vs Sin as Rebellion

1. In expressive individualism, sin, if the term were to be used, would be defined as not being true to yourself. Sin is defined inwardly. And, the solution to “sin” is reaffirmation of your inner being, and reconciliation with yourself.
2. In Scripture, sin is rooted in rebellion against God. Sin is defined outwardly. And, the solution to sin is repentance and reconciliation with God.

D. Inner Goodness vs Total Depravity

1. Expressive individualism sees the inward self as good and pure.
2. The Scriptures teach us that we are sinful in body and soul, inside and out, and every part of us needs restoration. There is no pure inner goodness that we need to tap into. And we do not seek wholeness and healthiness by turning inward, but turning to God.

E. Fickle Affirmation vs Eternal Affirmation

1. Expressive individualism seeks acceptance of “who you are” in a fickle culture, expecting that ever-changing culture to conform to your priorities of self.
2. In Christ, we have a true and lasting acceptance and affirmation, not based on something as unreliable as who we are, or how culture sees us, but in the grace and forgiveness and love and character of God.

F. Self-Worth vs Imago Dei

1. Expressive individualism finds value and worth internally, and is dependent upon our limited ability to rightly perceive ourselves. This is inherently unstable.
2. Christianity finds self-worth in that we are made in the image of God. Our value is fixed in Him, as unchanging as the fact that God made us.

G. Endless Pursuit vs Endless Rest

1. Expressive individualism presents a constant search for who we truly are. As we and our proclivities or preferences change, so does our identity and foundation. The pursuit is endless and exhausting, never coming to a place of peace.
 - a. This is especially true because in expressive individualism we are presented with endless options as to who we can and might be.
 - b. When will we know when we find the real us?
2. Christianity offers rest in Christ. All who come to Him find stability and peace, because Christ is unchanging.

H. Other Contrasts?

IV. How the Church Can Be a Countercultural Witness

A. Provide a Loving Community

1. Consider our central command – to love God and neighbor. Christians are called to turn outward, not inward.
2. Consider the communal nature of the church. See Acts 2:42-47 or Colossians 3:13-17 or Ephesians 4:1-16.
3. The church can be a countercultural blessing to those consumed by the inherent isolation and loneliness and divisiveness of expressive individualism.

“This clear-sighted vision of each individual’s ultimate self-reliance turns out to leave very little place for interdependence and to correspond to a fairly grim view of the individual’s place in the social world. Self-reliance is a virtue that implies being alone.” Habits of the Heart

B. Provide Meaningful Purpose

1. A life consumed with the self, and seeking affirmation of the self, is ultimately disappointing and unfulfilling. This is because God and His creation are larger than us, making us ill-suited for being the center of our focus.
2. Christianity offers a purpose grander than ourselves, a life consumed with the glory of God and love for neighbor, that is ultimately satisfying and fulfilling.

C. Demonstrate Self-Denial

1. As we fulfill the call to deny ourselves, we can be a countercultural witness by denying our “selves,” and seeking the good of neighbor and glory of God.
2. We do not have to be slaves to selves, but can serve another, and be liberated from self-slavery and selfish pursuit.

“To be shaped by grace in a culture of self, the most countercultural act one can commit . . . is to break its only taboo: to commit self-disobedience. To acknowledge that authority does not lie with us, that we ultimately have no autonomy. To admit that we are broken, that we are rebellious against God and his rule. To admit that Christ is ruler... We don’t just need resilience; we need gospel resilience.” Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church*

D. Offer Genuine Acceptance and Critique

1. In expressive individualism, the rules are constantly changing.
 - a. Our inner selves are fickle, and we may never be sure that we have found our true selves.
 - b. The culture shifts and changes, and we never can know if who want to be will be enduringly culturally accepted.
 - c. We can never know if the critique we receive today will be the same we would receive tomorrow, or that we received yesterday. We never know where we stand, or if our selves and actions are acceptable.
 - d. This renders any kind of critique or formation temporary at best. Who knows if any criticism will be valid tomorrow?
2. The church can be a place of timeless truth and doctrine and formation.
 - a. We need not worry that we won't be accepted tomorrow, for our acceptance comes not from our ability to be acceptable, but from Christ.
 - b. We have a faith handed down through generations, that should not rapidly shift or make wholesale change.
 - c. Because of this, we can receive genuine, trustworthy correction and formation, all the while not worrying about losing our place in the community.

E. Engage in Committed Relationships

1. In expressive individualism, relationships are only tenable if the other person affirms all about you.
 - a. A relationship is resisted if it includes obligations that may infringe upon personal autonomy.
 - b. This leads to isolation and loneliness.
2. The church has an opportunity to engage in relationships that endure beyond differences, and love that is committed through disagreement.
 - a. Knowing our foundation is in Christ, we can face disagreement without threat to self.
 - b. Christ has committed to us despite our failings. This allows us to commit to others despite failings in the relationship. In Him we have a model of commitment and love.

F. Other Ways the Church Can Be a Countercultural Witness?

V. Discussion

Given what we have discussed regarding expressive individualism, how would you guide someone, who is steeped in this ideology, to biblical truth? Where would you begin? What connection points or contrasts would you make between the expressive individualist and the gospel?

“For a society awash in expressive individualism, the greatest commandment is to be yourself and the second is like it: to affirm and applaud whatever self your neighbor chooses to be. The greatest sins, then, are to deny yourself or to question or judge someone else’s self-expression.” Trevin Wax, What Expressive Individualism Does to Sin