



# **Atomizing the world**

A Biblical challenge to individualism

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## Introduction

Individualism is the moral outlook on life which emphasizes the worth of the self and the personal over everything else.

For some centuries the direction of the 'modern' world has been towards individualism – the prioritisation of the self over against the community.

Freedom now means individual liberty. Whereas freedom was historically seen in regional, national or ethnic terms, 'Let my people go', Exodus 5.1, there has been a shift towards the personal rather than the corporate. We must emphasize this is mostly a problem of the Western world. It is probably not so much a problem elsewhere. The individual must have total autonomy. One of the symptoms of this is that any kind of unpaid duty or collective responsibility, even to the family, is now often deemed oppressive. Wives are 'chained to the sink'. Husbands are 'tied to the family'. Children are generally 'restricted' by parents.

### **Progress**

In fact, we find that the elevation of the 'one' over the group both defines and drives what is generally regarded as progress in the 21st century. Life is about self. This booklet asks questions about where this tendency comes from, whether it is wise, and where is it likely to lead? It also challenges the church.

Our world is commercialised in almost every aspect. It is the preference of the individual which informs industry and market forces. In the computerised age, today's digital technology focuses on personal devices often accompanied by private encryption. When it comes to recent political currents, it is self-determination and identity politics which is the motor behind different aspects of the sexual revolution. 'Free to be myself' is the slogan. This takes precedence over links and responsibilities to others. Our world is being atomized.

### **The virtual self**

The arrival of the digital age has accelerated this social atomization. Engaging with computer screens happens alone even when you are not alone. A youngster being immersed in a computer game, for example, frequently severs them from normal communications with the rest of the family. They can even take on a new persona. During 'screen time' they are another person in a different world altogether – an avatar of themselves?

Spurred on by the detached, almost ‘disembodied’, experience of online virtual reality, personal liberty is now beginning to move to extremes. We have what some term a new Gnosticism whereby the individual’s mind is the real person, ‘myself’, and the body is a secondary appendage or even a hindrance. Could human minds be ‘uploaded’ onto computers so as to exist free from the body? Or could the future pathway of, say, the transgender movement be seen in the idea that the body can be manipulated through medical technology to become whatever the mind wants it to be?<sup>1</sup>

Human beings are torn. We do have a desire for community – expressed in such phenomena as the local pub, rock concerts, sports supporters and online chatrooms. But individualism is paramount. What is offered by way of community tends to be superficial, transitory and predicated upon the priority of the self. We do still try to cultivate community, but they tend to be communities involving little or no responsibility. There are few, if any, obligations towards others. Inter-personal ties in current society are flimsy and easily broken.

How can we understand this tension between the individual and the collective? It is individualism (some would say hyper-individualism) which is shaping the West and beyond. Because it dominates so much of the contemporary social landscape it is worthwhile coming to God’s word with the question of how Christians should view individualism. This booklet is an initial sketch of what we find.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Feminism Against Progress*, by Mary Harrington, Forum, 2023, page 138-139

## 1: A Bible overview of individuality and community

For a firm foundation for our thoughts, we need to begin with God and who he has made us to be as human beings.

### **The Trinity**

From the start of Scripture, we are faced with an individuality and community which are inseparable. We find this in the essence of God himself. It is not a matter of 'either/or' but of 'both/and'.

On the first page of the Bible, we are shown that though there is only one true God, yet there is a plurality within God. In Genesis 1.1, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth', the Hebrew noun for God (*Elohim*) is plural while the verb 'created' is singular – denoting one God.

When it comes to the initial description of the creation of human beings we read, 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,"' Genesis 1.26. The words 'us'...'our'...'our' are prominent. Though this is sometimes interpreted as God announcing his decision to create humanity to the heavenly court of angels, it more naturally conveys the thought of abundance and plurality within the Godhead itself and therefore acts as an initial indication that relationship between Persons lies at the heart of the one God's very being.

The rest of the Bible makes clear that the true God is Trinitarian, Father, Son and Spirit, one God e.g., Matthew 28.19, 2 Corinthians 13.14. In God there is unity and diversity, the individual and the collective. Within himself, 'God is love,' 1 John 4.8, between the Persons of the Trinity. There is a togetherness within God which must mean that community is good. The individual is good and community is good. We are led to conclude wholeness in life includes both.

The relational side of God is broadened out as we move from the seven days of creation and rest into Genesis 2 which records the specific making of Adam and Eve. God is now repeatedly designated, not just as God, but the LORD God. 'The LORD' is God's OT covenant name. Covenant implies relationship. So, this too indicates that God is relational - and not just a relational being internally, but externally in his loving dealings with human beings. He graciously makes promises to us.

## Humanity

That same confluence of the individual and the communal is reflected in us as God's image. The way the original making of mankind is announced contains both the singular and the plural. 'So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them,' Genesis 1.27. There is a poetic parallel; 'He created him...he created them.'

The individual is very important. This is clear from the way that Adam first exists as an individual and has dealings with God as an individual, Genesis 2.7, 16, 17. God addresses Adam as 'you' in singular, v16, 17. He enters the garden alone and is given his own task, Genesis 2.5, 8.

Yet though the individual is important he or she is not meant to live in a relational vacuum. 'It is not good for the man to be alone...' Genesis 2.18. A solitary Adam is 'not good'. That phrase may seem somewhat jarring as we read Genesis. But if we have grasped the unity in community of God himself, the 'not good' ought not to be unexpected. Being alone, is not what God intends for human beings, persons in his image. It is only through being together with another that the image of the relational God can fully blossom. The individual finds fulfilment, his or her true self, in community.

Eve is made from Adam's side, and he rejoices that she is 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh', Genesis 2.23. There is now both the individual and the collective. And the individual finds fulfilment in being involved in the collective with the relationship and responsibilities that brings – hence the poetry of Genesis 2.23.

But, of course, there is far more here. There is a binary pattern in the initial chapters of Genesis – heavens and earth; darkness and light; morning and evening; sun and moon etc. This leads us to expect a pairing within humanity – male and female. But more, the way God has made the two sexes, male and female, is such that by coming together as 'one flesh', Genesis 2.24, in sexual union, they will reproduce new individuals and grow the group. The community will be enlarged. Children are added to them as the original individuals come together. The man and the woman can 'be fruitful and increase in number' with a prospect of filling the earth as one loving family. Community produces life.

## The Fall

But then in the unfolding history of our world comes the great disruption in

Genesis 3. The Fall of mankind into sin can be seen, at least partially, as an assault upon the collective nature of mankind via the elevation of the individual. 'Me' is not a wrong concept. But the 'me' centred mindset is set running by Satan's intervention. The marriage, the family, are under attack. What is meant to be inseparable, individuality and community, is undermined.

Pride and conceit are essentially sinful individual traits. They are exclusively about 'me' rather than other people. It was through conceit that the devil fell from his position, 1 Timothy 3.6. We may think of him therefore as one who rejected the community of heaven for his own self-exaltation.

The devil speaks to Eve, Genesis 3.1. He addresses her as an individual. He does not speak to the man and the woman together (where exactly was Adam, the head of the family?). The devil's deceptive offer, 'You shall be like God' can be read as the offer of deification of the individual. (We will come back to this later in the booklet). Eve knows that God's command applies to her for the 'you' in her repetition of the command 'you must not eat' here, in Genesis 3.3, is plural. Further, in the temptation, it is Eve's own assessment of the forbidden fruit as an individual (with no consultation with her husband), which leads her to eat it. She saw that it was 'good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom,' therefore, 'she took some and ate it,' Genesis 3.6.

Though God had spoken and given his command to Adam, he eats of the forbidden fruit offered him by his wife. In federal unity with Adam, the whole human race (substantially still future at this point, of course) falls as its head disobeys God, Romans 5.19. In that fall, not only does sin enslave us, but human community is sabotaged. Whereas initially Adam and Eve were at one and so were naked and felt no shame, Genesis 2.25, they are now alienated and hide from each other behind their fig leaves, Genesis 3.7. God then steps in to deliver his judgement. Whereas, before, the writer of Genesis speaks of a man cleaving to his wife in Genesis 2.24, now Adam blames his wife for his own disobedience and distances himself from her, Genesis 3.12 – indirectly accusing God who made her.

The initial harmony is now riddled with mutual suspicion and fragmentation.

As the story of sin and its consequences continues in Genesis, this alienation and nascent atomization of mankind leads to murder within the family, as Cain kills Abel and cloaks his actions with the justification 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Genesis 4.9. In Cain's well-known saying we see the idea of the individual

trumping the collective writ large.

Where has this brief investigation of the early chapters of Genesis led us? Broadly, we seem to be tracing out a trajectory showing that, without denying the importance of the individual, God seeks to build community (compatible with his nature), whereas the devil's track is towards individualism and self-exaltation (in correspondence with his own fallen personality). As God has created his own loving image in humanity, Satan seeks to recast humanity in his self-centred image.

### **Old Testament Israel**

Genesis moves on. God's judgment on a sinful world at the Flood also shows that God's act of salvation through the ark is collective. Besides the animals, it is not just Noah who is saved but his family.

However, when we come to Babel it is made clear that, though community is powerful, it is not good in and of itself. There is tremendous potential in the human collective. Together, 'nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them,' Genesis 11.6. But evil entered at the Fall and has taken hold of people. So, because their united purpose is to build a city 'that reaches to the heavens', Genesis 11.4, without God, sinful mankind must be dispersed. Hence the confusion of the languages by God, Genesis 11.9. Community in evil must be broken.

By contrast, God's covenant purpose in salvation through the call of Abraham is for collective good. In a world that is under curse, Abraham will be blessed and become 'a great nation...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you,' Genesis 12.2,3. He will become a community and bring untold benefit to the world as a whole. Jesus Christ, the descendant of Abraham, Matthew 1.1, will ultimately bring this about.

God's promise to Abraham begins to be outworked in history. His descendants become a great nation, even while in slavery in Egypt. Rescued by God through the leadership of Moses, the nation of Israel, as a collective entity, enters into covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Central to this covenant are the 10 commandments. The entire Decalogue is relational towards God and other people. This law leads the individual to promote godly community. The apostle Paul writes: 'The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may

be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law,' Romans 12.9-10.

As Israel settles in the Promised Land, eventually David, the nearest approximation to an ideal king, emerges. He is one who loves the LORD and cares as a shepherd for the nation. But the subsequent demise of the nation follows as kings turn to other gods. Idolatry makes them more concerned for their own reputation as individuals than they are for the good of the nation. The prophets upbraided the nation's leaders not only for idolatry but also for their mistreatment of the covenant people. 'They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the heads of the poor as the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed,' Amos 2.6,7. The OT finishes with a recognition of the hearts of fathers and children alienated from one another, which, unless reversed, will bring a curse, Malachi 4.6.

### **Jesus and community**

As we move into the NT with the coming of Christ there is an emphasis on the collective nature of salvation from the beginning. The genealogy which opens Matthew's Gospel gives a rich sense of the historical 'people of God'. Though the scope of this salvation overflows far beyond the Jews, before Jesus is born, Joseph is told that the child will 'save his people from their sins,' Matthew 1.18. To the Magi who come to worship the child, the prophet Micah is quoted, with his prediction that the one born in Bethlehem, will be the ruler 'who will shepherd my people Israel,' Matthew 2.6.

In Luke's account of the nativity story, the angel announces to the shepherds, 'I bring good news of great joy that will be for all the people,' Luke 2.10.

Matthew introduces the Lord Jesus as the greater Moses, who came out of Egypt, Matthew 2.15, 19 and from the mountain blesses the new people of God, Matthew 5.1-12. He goes on to expound Moses' law in a way that exceeds expectations and overflows with love, Matthew 5.43, 44. Together they are to be the salt of the earth and a community which is the light of the world, Matthew 5.13-16. They are to aim at individual piety, Matthew 6.1-18, but at the same time the prayer taught by the Lord Jesus is a community prayer beginning with the words 'Our Father...' And they are not to worry about personal wealth or preferences, Matthew 6.19-34, knowing that as they prioritise God's righteous kingdom (a collective concept), they will find themselves looked after. In

everything they do, they are to 'do to others what you would have them do to you,' Matthew 7.12. This is Jesus both establishing and nurturing his church as a community. 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,' John 13.35.

Jesus frequently acts in such a way as, not only to bless individuals, but to restore isolated outcasts to their place within the community of the people of God. Both the individual and the community are important.

He deliberately seeks out the lost. Rejected but repentant Zacchaeus has a new heart for people and Jesus states that, 'this man too is a son of Abraham,' – he belongs, Luke 19.1-10.

The miracles of the Master accomplish the same goal. Lepers who must be kept quarantined are cleansed and so reinstated in society, Mark 1.40-45. The demoniac who lived alone among the tombs is restored to his right mind and sent back to his people, Mark 5.19. The isolated woman, embarrassed by her issue of blood which made her 'unclean', Mark 5.32, is healed, confesses her faith publicly and is a 'daughter', Mark 5.34 – part of Christ's family.

Our Lord's atoning death is, of course, legitimately seen as being for individuals, Galatians 2.20, but also has a definite collective aim. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, Ephesians 5.25.

### **The early church**

The outpouring of the Spirit and the preaching of Jesus as 'Lord and Christ' results in the calling together of God's new community – the church. This fledgling assembly is marked by togetherness. 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common...' Acts 2.42-44.

The striking unity of the Jerusalem church after Pentecost is not simply meant to be an exceptional and glorious start to Christ's church. It is meant to set an example and be programmatic for all true churches. We see this in larger perspective when we understand that God the Father's overall plan is reconciliation and 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together, under one head, even Christ,' Ephesians 1.10.

Here is the reversal, not only of Babel, but of the Fall in social terms. Whereas

the devil's scheme is for division and fragmentation, God's programme for the ages is individuals together in community in Christ.

The different elements of the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5.22-23, are not so much to be seen as virtues in an individual (though they are that) but as social characteristics that build, enhance and maintain community.

Commenting on the fruit of the Spirit and its outworkings, Professor John Barclay writes: 'Here, as elsewhere in his letters, Paul understands love to be expressed best not as one-way service (giving but receiving nothing back) but in reciprocal relationships. 'Through love be slaves to one another,' Galatians 5.13 and, 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,' Galatians 6.2. Paul envisages communities where no-one is self-sufficient. In these communities, believers are not expected to bear their own burdens by themselves and also to carry the burdens of others. Neither is everyone to look after themselves, leaving everyone else to do the same. Rather members will freely contribute to one another but also to receive from one another, so that each helps the other to carry their burdens.'<sup>2</sup>

The good news of Jesus is not meant to just produce godly individuals, but to result in loving community in Christ. Indeed, there is no such thing as godliness in isolation.

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<sup>2</sup> *Paul & the Power of Grace*, by John M. G. Barclay, Eerdmans Publishing, 2020, page 69.

## **2: The secular deification of the individual**

Made in God's image, while the individual is important, he or she will only find fulfilment in community. This is the thrust of the Bible's teaching beginning in Genesis.

But, as we have seen, Satan's strategy in the Fall set out to destroy human interdependence and unity with the lie that 'you will be like God,' Genesis 3.5. God had said that isolation was 'not good' Genesis 2.18. But now being 'like God', Adam and Eve would determine for themselves what is 'good' and what is not. And the direction of what they now saw as 'good' in their fallen state favoured individuality and even the exaltation of self. One immediately thinks of the willingness of OT pagan kings, like Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, to be treated as gods. In the NT the Roman emperor demanded allegiance, which vied with that due to God himself, Mark 12.14,15. The early Christians died confessing 'Jesus is Lord' rather than 'Caesar is Lord'.

### **Nuance and balance**

We are considering the perils of individuality. But we must certainly note that unless we get the balance right, community can also be perilous. The voice and personality of the individual can be quashed under pressure to conform to a controlling community's demands. This is equally wrong. This is the way of dictatorship, tribalism and the religious cult.<sup>3</sup> Mindless obedience to authoritarian figures is a menace – in the church too.

However, we are tracing the tension between individuality and community. As we do so it would be foolish to draw this trend towards the dominance of self in purely black and white terms. It is not that the Fall has made us such self-centred individuals that we now all wish to live in total isolation (outer darkness?) with no contact with other human beings.

Community benefits the self. Work is enhanced, help is available, protection from the elements and enemies is afforded in community, Ecclesiastes 4.9-12. The logic of treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves, still makes sense, Matthew 7.12. Home with family remains a place of solace and affection, even for fallen humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> See my booklet *Freedom and Humanity in the Churches*, also in the book *The Balanced Pastor*, Grace Publications 2023

To be an absolute loner is to be somewhat inhuman, Luke 8.29. But the general leaning of the sinful heart is towards 'my' concerns taking precedence over those of the community, Luke 15.12,13. God's word constantly reminds us to love God and to 'love our neighbour as we love ourselves,' Mark 12.31. Loving community is God's purpose for us. But where the word of God is suppressed or ignored, the sinner's inclination towards selfishness has much less to hold it in check.

This means that the pathway of individualism and even the ultimate deification of the individual is more easily trodden in a secular world which ignores God and his word. And if there is to be a nod in the direction of community then it must be a community which serves 'me', is worth 'my' while, and makes no demands and carries no responsibilities.

### **Secular society and the self**

Here, briefly, are some of the elements which historically have contributed towards secularism, the break-up of community and the promotion of individualism.

- *Philosophical Enlightenment*

The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe provides an approximate starting point for the emergence of secular society.

The Enlightenment was essentially a rejection of the idea of divine revelation in favour of the autonomy of human reason. The scientist and philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) set the tone of things with his famous first step in the attainment of knowledge, 'I think, therefore, I am'. And from that individualistic starting point, reason, it was said, would lead to truth.

- *Population growth*

The Bible has already informed us of the division of the nations as God confused the languages at Babel in order to weaken humanity's ability for combined sin. It alienated people from one another.

With world population growth taking off around the 15th century and rocketing during the twentieth century, the ties between people were weakened by sheer weight of numbers.

- *Industrial revolution*

Starting with the invention of steam power in the 18th century the development

of manufacturing processes and machines not only drew people away from agricultural village communities and into the city factories, but with their vast expansion, the cities often became anonymous places, where people could be 'alone in a crowd'. They were unrecognisable to most others.

Whereas everyone knew everyone else and were interconnected in a village or small town, now the nuclear family became much more of an independent unit as moving to the city for work often strained or severed ties to wider family.

- *Darwinian evolution*

With the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 the idea that the world could be explained in purely materialistic terms gained more credence. The acceptance of Darwin's theory is popularly summarised in the phrase 'survival of the fittest'. This is most naturally interpreted in individualistic terms. We are told that this is the way the world is and to think otherwise is mere sentimentalism. Selfishness is legitimised.

Concern for the community becomes a secondary issue. The priority is to 'look after number 1 – myself.' Self-sufficiency, apart from depending on others, becomes the goal.

- *World Wars*

The two World Wars of the 20th century also had a big influence on the mindset of ordinary people pushing them towards a more individualistic view of life.

It was felt, especially concerning WWI, that many ordinary soldiers had been treated as 'cannon fodder' by uncaring generals and that their lives did not matter compared to 'the cause' or to 'King and country'. This led to a reaction which, understandably, championed the individual.

- *Popular psychology*

Around the mid-twentieth century the idea that boosting people's self-esteem would solve many of society's problems gained widespread acceptance. It was thought that if a person feels good about themselves, they are more likely to treat others well. At the popular level, the *Star Wars* movies were just one strand in a whole raft of Hollywood films which encouraged people to 'believe in yourself.'

Actually, scientific evidence does not support the thesis that high self-esteem makes us better people.<sup>4</sup> But no matter. It was such an enticing theory that it

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Big Ego Trip* by Glynn Harrison, IVP, 2013, pages 83, 84

now has huge influence across the world, with an accompanying inflation of ‘my rights’, and of an attitude of entitlement. The self becomes sacrosanct, even deified.

- *Social media*

With the advent of computers, satellite technology and the digital revolution, the internet has given every individual on social media a place on a worldwide stage.

The individual craves that status. This is how the commentator Will Storr puts it: ‘The future of the internet would be ‘social’. It would reassert the power of the ‘I’. Its platforms would flatten hierarchies further, giving every ‘I’ a voice, a character, a presence, a brand. It would ride on top of our increasing sense of individualism...pitching self against self in a ceaseless competition for followers, feedback and likes.’<sup>5</sup> The internet is a place where the individual can assert themselves while being part of a virtual ‘society’ which demands little or no obligations towards other people. In virtual reality the self can create its own world and declare its judgments untrammelled by reality or even social niceties. In a sense it can ‘be like God’.

In Scripture, the apostle Paul speaks of ‘the last days’ during which ‘people will become lovers of themselves’, 2 Timothy 3.2. This is where we now are as a society.

### **Where does this lead?**

The individualistic attitude is accepted and assumed in our society, almost without question. It is pervasive and touches on every aspect of life. It underlies the so-called ‘American dream’ which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as ‘the ideal that every citizen... should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination and initiative.’ This has a very ‘me’ or ‘me and my family’ feel about it and is the idea which probably inspires a majority of intelligent people in the free world.

But that ‘American dream’ in a secular environment was always unstable and was bound to over-balance into subjectivism. ‘All that really matters, is myself and the way I see things’. And in a secular world, the human self is to be explained in purely mechanistic and materialistic terms. Our self is just a product

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<sup>5</sup> *Selfie: How the West became self-obsessed*, by Will Storr, Picador books, 2017, page 255

of our biochemistry, our upbringing and our environment.

But as we travel further into the 21st century this trajectory, based on these assumptions, is inevitably taking us into darkness.

- *Freedom and loneliness*

Individualism, putting oneself first, has a certain freedom about it but leads inevitably to isolation and loneliness. From the very beginning God told us that it is 'not good' for human beings to be alone. The Western world has begun to experience an epidemic loneliness which crushes people as individuals and leads to many detrimental medical conditions, including heart disease, dementia and suicide.

A 2003 report to the American Commission for Children at Risk 'presented extensive scientific evidence that the human brain is hardwired for two fundamental kinds of connection: horizontally in close relationships with other human beings; and vertically, in finding moral and spiritual meaning through a relationship with a transcendent divine being'. [The promotion of a philosophy of thorough going individualism] 'is actually nothing less than the imposition of collective emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physiological abuse'<sup>6</sup> on people.

- *Freedom and equality*

Without God, there is not ultimate reference point or framework for morality outside of ourselves. The only kind of morality which seems to make any sense is the advocacy of freedom and equality for all individuals.

However, total freedom and equality (sameness) for human beings actually requires the destruction of all family obligations and gender itself – in other words almost everything that makes us human. If I have responsibilities, I am not free. If I am different from others, I am not equal. With the possibilities of cosmetic surgery and the modern pharmaceutical industry in mind, the writer Mary Harrington puts it like this: 'For if everything that makes us human resides in our consciousness, and there's nothing natural or integral about our bodies, then we really are just meat. And inert soul-less meat – living or dead – can legitimately be hacked, spliced with fish-skin or pig or monkey DNA, chopped and remodelled at will...I don't want to live in this world.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The cult of individualism and the loneliness epidemic*, by Richard L Land, Christian Post Voices, 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2023

<sup>7</sup> *Feminism Against Progress* by Mary Harrington, Forum / Swift Press, 2023, page 161

- *Freedom and the market*

Breaking free from all obligations to others in the pursuit of individual liberty is made to appear very enticing. But not only does the Bible warn us that hedonism never finally delivers happiness, we find in reality, we are not free at all. We become slaves to our desires and those who purport to be able to fulfil our 'needs.'

Commenting in *The Spectator* on the idea of 'toxic parents' which encourages children to turn their backs on their families, the journalist Mary Wakefield writes: 'Individualism has momentum. Once you sweep away collective belonging, family ties start to loosen too – and capitalism loves lonely souls. It can sell them weighted blankets to cry into at night.'<sup>8</sup>

- *Conditioning and democracy*

With a materialistic view of humans as machines, and no divine law, C. S. Lewis sees that 'good' becomes whatever individuals are conditioned to believe is good. And conditioning is more than a possibility in an age of computer screens on the other side of which is an artificial intelligence. This spells the end of democracy.

In an essay titled *The Poison of Subjectivism* he explains: 'Many a popular planner on a democratic platform, many a mild-eyed scientist in a democratic laboratory means, in the last resort, just what the Fascist means. He believes that 'good' means whatever men are conditioned to approve. He believes it is the function of him and his kind to condition men; to create consciences by eugenics, psychological manipulation of infants, state education and mass propaganda. Because he is confused, he does not yet fully realize that those who create conscience cannot be subject to conscience themselves. But he must awake to the logic of his position sooner or later; and when he does, what barrier remains between us and the final division of the race into a few conditioners who stand themselves over morality and the many conditioned in whom such morality as the experts choose is produced at the experts' pleasure. If 'good' means only the local ideology, how can those who invent the local ideology be guided by any idea of good themselves? The very idea of freedom presupposes some objective moral law which overarches rulers and ruled alike. Subjectivism about values is eternally incompatible with democracy.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The dangerous cult of 'toxic parents'*, by Mary Wakefield, *The Spectator*, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2023, page 21

<sup>9</sup> *Christian Reflections*, C. S. Lewis, Fount Paperbacks / Collins, 1988, page 108

This is the direction in which untrammelled individualism would seem to be leading us by the nose, especially as the media and the internet have such power to influence us. But as Marsh Moyle has written: 'Individualism is too small a unit for human flourishing'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Rumours of a Better Country: Searching for trust and community in a time of moral outrage*, by Marsh Moyle, IVP, 2023, page 175

### **3: The church as community?**

The church worldwide, and local churches in particular, are meant to be communities of believers in Christ. We are meant to be beacons of true love in a fragmented and increasingly lonely society.

Churches are not spiritual shopping malls in which individuals can pick and choose and then retreat again into their own private sphere of themselves, their career and their family. Churches should be agents of fellowship in Christ and catalysts to restore the 'togetherness' of humanity.

But instead, many churches are blind to the dangers of individualism and are complicit (perhaps inadvertently) in promoting a Christianised version of an individualistic world view. Here are some of the areas of modern evangelical church life which are warning signals and must be challenged.

#### **Personalized Sundays**

The first day of the week, 1 Corinthians 16.2, the Lord's Day, Revelation 1.10, was the day that the NT church gathered to worship in community. The risen Lord Jesus first met with his disciples on a Sunday, John 20.1, 19, 26. The very first coming together of the wider church, on the Day of Pentecost, was a Sunday.

The assembling of the committed believers is obviously the heart of the community life of the church. This is when they not only meet with God through his Word and by his Spirit in Christ, but when they see each other face to face, can shake each other's hands, can look each other in the eye as they hear from the Bible and praise God together. And yet the churches currently tend to minimise Sunday gatherings.

Many churches these days only meet once on a Sunday not seeing the blindingly obvious, that the less we meet the weaker will be our sense of community. Whereas the original church in Jerusalem was so keen to be together with their brothers and sisters in Christ that they met every day in the Temple courts, Acts 2.46, we are so enthralled by our individual concerns that many Christians find any kind of Sunday attendance a stretch. Certainly, the tradition of two Sunday services is dying out. The interests of the individual, whether it be for relaxation, the family or for sport, is taking precedence.

## **Personalized identity**

The question 'who am I?' is an understandable question in a secular world. What can I say about myself? Am I the mere transient product of the forces of blind chance? Or am I a special creation of God, Psalm 139.13?

Many young people are anxious over such questions. Therefore, the church and its teachers have for the last decade or so rightly responded to this question assuring Christians of their identity in Christ. The classic verses in Galatians have been of great comfort to many: 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ Jesus clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise,' Galatians 3.26-29.

The problem is that those kinds of verses have tended to be explained almost completely individualistically.

You are a 'son' (females as well); you are clothed in Christ; you are a true child of Abraham; you are an heir. But though all that is true, the corporate side of Paul's words is often neglected. Again and again, as he addresses the churches in Galatia here, he emphasises that this is true of 'all' of them. In particular, he underlines their collective unity. 'You are all one in Christ Jesus'. Though personal identity in Christ is to the fore, our corporate identity is often neglected. One book I saw recently on the subject of identity had 7 chapters – 6 concentrated on personal identity and just 1 looked at our corporate identity as Christians and members of churches. This imbalance is an indication of how we have swallowed individualism. In fact, the full dimensions of the love of Christ can only be comprehended 'together with all the saints', Ephesians 3.18.

## **Personalized sermons**

The way the modern evangelical churches lean towards a Christianised individualism is often indicated by the application sections of expositions from the pulpit.

There can be little doubt that the standard of much in preaching has risen in the last 60 years. Preachers are much better at understanding the context of their texts and where they stand in the flow of Biblical history. There is often helpful clarity to the structure of a sermon and helpful and up to date illustrations to illuminate the congregation's understanding. However, when it comes to how the message of the text should apply to our lives, we often find it is very

individualistic. The staple applications of contemporary sermons have to do with personal prayer, personal Bible reading, personal evangelism, personal handling of emotions, how to deal with personal tragedies, the Christian at work and the Christian in the family. The underlying assumption is that we see ourselves almost exclusively as individuals. This is how preaching tries to make itself relevant to the coming week. However, there is comparatively little concerning the need for church membership, of seeing ourselves as part of a body gifted to contribute to the well-being of that body (that is the domain of the church 'staff'). Yet our spiritual gifting from God is specifically allocated to build up the body of Christ as each part does its work.

### **Personalized baptism**

On the Day of Pentecost, 'Those who accepted (Peter's) message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day,' Acts 2.41. To be baptised was to join the church. And if we want to explore more fully what joining the church meant, the following verses explain. It meant being 'devoted to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer,' Acts 2.42. The fellowship meant that 'All the believers were together and had everything in common...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God...' Acts 2.44-46.

To be baptised was indeed to personally make a public declaration of faith in Christ, but it also meant being baptised into the body of Christ, the church, 1 Corinthians 12.13. But the majority of evangelical churches now make a separation between baptism and church membership. The emphasis is more or less solely on individual faith without any obligation to a corporate dimension.

### **Personalized church**

As the world suffered from the Covid pandemic beginning in 2020, churches understandably had to stop meeting together in order to try to stem the spread of the disease in the community. Churches did their best to honour the Lord's Day by meeting together online. Church services were broadcast on YouTube. Fellowship groups took place via Zoom.

Because of their previously inculcated individualistic mindset, this caused many Christians to wonder whether physically meeting together as churches is actually worthwhile. They were being encouraged by the online sermons. They enjoyed singing along to pre-recorded worship songs as part of the online service. And it

was so much more convenient to worship from the sofa without having to get the car out to go to church.

Many churches saw a drop in attendance through Covid from which they have never fully recovered. But this is wrong. Gathering together is essential to what a church is. But Christians will not see that clearly if they think only in terms of their personal salvation and their personal walk with the Lord. One young girl who attends our current church with her parents asked her school teacher if she was a Christian. The teacher said, 'Yes, I follow the Bible, but I don't go to the church.' The little girl replied, 'You don't follow the Bible then!'

But the personalized church is often disguised more subtly than that. Large churches gather many people. They come together but there is little or no corporate life of the church as a body. Such churches are often the equivalent of a spiritual supermarket where people drive in, once on a Sunday, to get edified through the sermon, in order that they can simply carry on their individualistic lives – of myself, my family and my career. Consciously or unconsciously, these 'successful' churches are simply providing maintenance for a Christianised form of individualism.

### **Personalized communion**

The Lord's Supper is the central Christian celebration. We remember Jesus. We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes, 1 Corinthians 11.24-26. But we do this as a community, as a church.

The apostle Paul emphasizes this. He writes, 'Because there is one loaf, we, who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf,' 1 Corinthians 10.17. Communion is a celebration of what Christ has done for us. Emblematically we drink 'his blood' and we eat 'his flesh' in the wine and bread. It portrays our solidarity with him as the means by which the benefits of the cross are ours. But Paul says that it is equally meant to be a portrayal of our solidarity with each other as we eat from the one loaf. It highlights the fact that we are one in the church. Indeed, the reprimand that Paul gives to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11 is precisely because people are acting selfishly as if they are not all members of the same body. The communion is meant to be for a church of people at peace with each other and committed to each other.

And yet the way communion operates in most evangelical churches takes little or no notice of this collective dimension. The Lord's table is regarded far more in

terms of 'my personal communion with Christ' than it is as a communion together as a church. Further, Christians who are not members of the church and have made it quite clear that they do not wish to be part of the church (and perhaps any church) are nevertheless welcome to take the bread and wine. The church as a body of members is set aside while the 'rights' of the individual to come to the table are validated. The open table is frequently an expression of pure individualism.

In these ways, and probably many more, the contemporary church is cooperating with the world's agenda of individualism.

### **Rethinking church**

In the NT the two most frequent descriptions of a local church at the functional level are those of a family and of a body – the body of Christ. The 'church of the living God' is described by Paul as 'God's household,' 1 Timothy 3.15. Pastor Timothy is to regard the people of the church as 'brothers' and 'sisters' and 'fathers' and 'mothers', 1 Timothy 5.1,2. Of those who love his word, Jesus says, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother,' Mark 3.34, 35. Of the local church in Corinth Paul writes, 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it,' 1 Corinthians 12.27. These are essentially corporate pictures of the church.

The church is not just a resource for individuals to use in their pursuit of their personal agendas. It is their family. Now, obviously it is possible to over-emphasize the collective nature of the church so that it becomes unhealthy and cult-like. But at present the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction and many Christians need to rethink if they want to obey the Lord.

Many NT letters are structured in two parts. The first part is the 'indicative' section which indicates what God has done for us through his grace in Christ. The second part is the 'imperative' section in which we are told how to live in the light of what God has done. It is significant that in two of his major doctrinal letters, the apostle Paul's first part of call by way of imperative application is the Christian's involvement with the church.

Having concluded the great doctrinal section of Romans and having exhorted his readers 'in view of God's mercy to offer their bodies as living sacrifices', he tells them not to conform to the world. How does he first encourage them to think differently from the world? He points to the church as the body of Christ. 'Just as

each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others,' Romans 12.4, 5 – and how telling is that last phrase for our view of church!

Again, having finished the more doctrinal part of his letter of Ephesians, where does Paul direct the attention of his readers? He speaks about making every effort to keep the unity of the church, Ephesians 4.1-4 and then proceeds to explain how the ascended Christ has given gifts to the church that everyone might be 'prepared for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up,' Ephesians 4.12.

How can I first put my Christianity into action and apply what I have learned? Paul's answer here is by taking your place and playing your part to serve and be served in the church.

We must rethink the church as presenting a loving challenge to the tide towards atomizing the world.