



LOVERS OF THEMSELVES

The sexual revolution and
the church in current society

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Introduction

The author Washington Irving, wrote the fanciful tale of a hen-pecked, work-shy man named *Rip Van Winkle*. Published in 1819, the story is set in late 18th century America and tells how Rip lay down while squirrel hunting in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. Dulled by drink, he fell into a deep sleep. He awoke 20 years later, not realizing that he had slept more than a night.

There were signs something strange had occurred. His beard was a foot long, his dog was gone and his rifle was covered in rust. When he entered his village, he didn't recognize it. There were buildings he didn't remember. His clothes looked old fashioned. Children made fun of him. Rip proclaimed himself a loyal subject of King George III not realizing that while he had been asleep, the War of Independence had occurred and America was now its own country. He was out of place and he didn't know why.

Waking to a new reality

Many Christians today are having a similar experience. They may not have been physically asleep for 20 years, but they have maybe been cocooned in a little Christian bubble of Sunday church, Christian conferences, Christian books, Christian music, insulated against, and disconnected from, secular society. Now they are waking to the fact that the world has changed and things can't go on as they have before.

Whereas believers used to be thought somewhat odd but basically decent folk, now we are increasingly regarded as a harmful influence in society. We are now 'the bad guys'.¹ Whereas things like freedom of religion and freedom of speech were once regarded as absolute rights, such an outlook is now being challenged. You can lose your job for expressing certain ideas, especially Biblical ideas concerning things like gender and marriage. Society is dramatically different – possibly in a way unprecedented in history. And it is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Pastors in a hurry

As an example of how much things have changed, Carl Trueman begins his landmark book on this subject by asking how the statement 'I am a woman

¹ See *Being the Bad Guys*, by Stephen MacAlpine, Good Book Company, 2021

trapped in a man's body' has come to look cogent and meaningful in today's society.² In the days of our grandfathers, such a statement would have been met with blank incredulity. But now it is taken very seriously indeed. What has happened?

Thankfully, some theologians and church leaders have begun to analyze things and to try to give a steer to the churches concerning the new situation we face. In my opinion, Carl Trueman's book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is the most thorough and helpful introduction so far to our current situation. However, it is a big volume of over 400 pages of intensive thought and often closely argued reading for which many a busy pastor simply will not have time.

So this booklet gives my own brief Biblical introduction and then is mainly an attempt to sketch an overview of Trueman's work. My purpose is to get us thinking and hopefully for pastors to be able to give accessible teaching on the situation to God's people in the churches. After all, this is not simply a piece of fascinating contemporary history; it is something which may well cause faithful Christians to lose their friends and maybe their livelihoods.

² *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*, by Carl Trueman, Crossway, 2020, page 19

1: Biblical background

Many cultural norms concerning sex and acceptable sexual behaviour have been swept away. In particular, the Christian view of mankind being composed of two genders, male and female, Genesis 1.27, and the Bible's teaching concerning marriage, Matthew 19.4,5, is in the process of being rejected as oppressive and damaging.

How have we got to this way of thinking? We need to get a grip on this firstly from Scripture. This seismic shift has not come out of nowhere, neither does it take the God of the Bible by surprise.

What happens when God is rejected?

For the last hundred years or more, secular thinkers have argued that God either doesn't exist or at least is an irrelevance to daily life. He could be dispensed with and very little would change. But the Bible says otherwise. To turn away from God affects a society at the deepest possible level. We should understand that this is the root of the titanic changes we are witnessing.

Here are three key NT passages which highlight what happens.

2 Timothy 3.1-4

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...

Jesus taught that in the last days 'many will turn away from the faith', Matthew 24.10, rejecting God. Here Paul lists some of the bad fruit which must inevitably follow. But notice two things in particular. *First*, people become 'lovers of themselves'. The self is put above all else; hence Trueman's title, 'the rise of the modern self'. *Second*, that means, in practical terms, that people become 'lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God'. Pleasure and personal 'feel good' are the priority. This is what loving yourself is about. And from the list of other sins Paul mentions consequent upon this, we can infer 'woe betide anyone who gets in the way'.

Ephesians 4.18-19

They (those without God) are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

These verses spell out the same trajectory towards hedonism for those who live without God. 'Having lost all sensitivity' to God and to spiritual things, they fill the void left in their hearts with sensuality. They 'give themselves over' to physical pleasures. And here Paul indicates that this heads in the direction of illicit sex, which will tend to extremes. This is where we are.

Romans 1.18-32

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being clearly seen from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another...

God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another...

He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done....

In our third passage, note the parallel with the second. We have seen the apostle speaks of those who have 'given themselves over' to sensuality, but now we read that 'God gave them over' to their sinful desires and appetites as an expression of his wrath for their denial of him. When God is denied, society does not stay the same. It tends to become highly sexualized and aggressively so.

This is our society, our current culture. In some ways, Trueman's book simply traces in modern history the trajectory indicated by these Scripture texts. The Western world which used to be thought of as 'Christendom', has now become dominated by sex and sexual politics. While, down the years, there have always been libertines, it is now their ideas which command the culture. This societal move has taken centuries to emerge because a Christian morality and view of family has been the fundamental building block of Western society. But now that is being overthrown.

So, in this booklet, we will try to summarize Trueman's work as to how this has happened and is happening and note some of his conclusions.

Preliminaries

Before we get into the argument, there are some preliminary ideas which Trueman has borrowed from other modern thinkers and to which he refers.

Mimesis and Poiesis

'Put simply, these terms refer to two different ways of thinking about the world. A mimetic view regards the world as having a given order and meaning and thus sees human beings as required to discover that meaning and conform themselves to it. Poiesis, by way of contrast, sees the world as so much raw material out of which (our own) meaning and purpose can be created by the individual.'³ It is clear that suppressing the truth of the Creator God and opting for no God invites us to Poiesis. We make of the world what we want with no-one to tell us what to do. And, of course, the astonishing advances in various technologies make this seem more credible. At one level, through surgery and chemicals, a man can become a woman if he/she wants to, etc.

As Christians with an understanding of sin and the built-in rebelliousness of fallen human nature, Romans 6.23, we can see that people would naturally prefer Poiesis to Mimesis. Many today see the world in Poiesis terms. 'You can be whatever you want to be.'

Three types of world

The American sociologist Phillip Reiff has a related idea. He spoke in terms of 3 types of worlds.

First worlds are pagan, with moral codes based on myths generally accepted by the society. Second worlds are those based on a faith in their God. Both first and second worlds, therefore, have a moral outlook founded in something transcendent, outside of people and this is a source of stability for those societies. Third worlds, by way of stark contrast, do not root their moral imperatives in anything sacred. There is nothing and no-one above themselves. They justify themselves and their actions on the basis of themselves. Rejecting God moves us into what Reiff would call a third world.

In fact, Reiff labels this kind of third world an 'anti-culture' because it sees the civilization and moral frameworks of first and second worlds as oppressive and restrictive of personal freedom. Thus, a third world deliberately attempts to destabilize and destroy first and second world cultural norms through what Reiff calls 'deathworks'. These are things which cynically make the old values look impotent and ridiculous. This is a primary aspect, for example, of pornography. Not only does it promote lust and treat people as mere 'things', but it repudiates any notion that sex has any significance beyond the pleasure of the act itself. Sex is simply fun and God, and those who want to restrict our desires, are prudish kill-joys.

In Reiffian terms, we now live in a third world, or at least on the brink of it.

2: The modern self and identity

Dispensing with God has reshaped how people now think of themselves and of others.

Trueman writes: 'The underlying argument is that the sexual revolution, and its various manifestations in modern society, cannot be treated in isolation but rather must be interpreted as the specific and perhaps most obvious social manifestation of a much deeper and wider revolution in the understanding of what it means to be a self'.⁴

Trajectory of the self

Here are the labels which we will use to summarize how Trueman sees the historical pathway of the self. These will enlighten us as to how we got to where we are now.

The 'psychological self' was followed by the 'romantic self'. This was succeeded by the 'plastic (or malleable) self'. Next came the explicitly 'sexual self', which has now, under the arguments of the New Left, become the 'sexually politicized self'. (I am paraphrasing here).

All these are quite different from what we might propose as a Biblical view of self, made in the image of God, Genesis 1.27, fallen but redeemed for Christ and to become like Christ. This might find reflection in the apostle Paul's famous words, describing himself as a sinner saved by grace, 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,' Galatians 2.20.⁵ The Christian view of the self is very much an outward looking self. We look to God and to Christ for our salvation, meaning and identity. But the modern self is one that has turned inward on itself.

- ***The psychological self***

Our first stop en route as we come away from Reformation thinking into the period of the Enlightenment of the 18th century is with Jean-Jacques Rousseau

⁴ Trueman page 35

⁵ Will Storr has attempted a secular history of the self in his book *Selfie: How the West became self-obsessed*, Picador, 2018. In a rather distorted understanding of Scripture, he labels the Christian view of the self as 'The bad self'. His whole historical trajectory is as follows: The dying self; the tribal self; the perfectible self; the bad self; the good self; the special self; the digital self.

(1712-1778). For Rousseau, people are intrinsically good until they are corrupted by the forces of society. (This of course, is very different from a Christian point of view). But he is the thinker who, instead of looking outward to God, invites the self to turn inward. The real identity of an individual is to be found in the inner psychological autobiography.⁶ Rousseau wrote of his *Confessions*: 'It is the history of my soul that I promised, and to relate it faithfully I require no other memorandum; all I need do, as I have done up until now, is to look inside myself.'

Along with this went an emphasis on self-love⁷, empathy and sympathy as the main informers of conscience and the tension between the individual and corrupt society. Trueman comments that in Rousseau 'we can see emerging the basic outlines of modern expressive individualism'.

- ***The romantic self***

The poets of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley, take the ideas of Rousseau from the intellectual elite and popularize them into mainstream culture. Rousseau's idea of society corrupting and brutalizing the innocent individual, seemed writ large in the days of the Industrial Revolution. The solution was to turn inward and back to an idealized rural existence.

Trueman states, 'Both Wordsworth and Shelley articulate views of poetry that press a clear connection between poetic aesthetics and ethics'. True morality for these romantics was about what felt right and looked right to the individual. Once you look away from external frames of reference all 'moral' judgments tend to become nothing but expressions of personal preference or feeling. We enter a 'therapy culture'. This has major implications for sexual ethics. Authenticity as a human being is about being unashamed of one's own desires and acting on them.⁸ Obviously, such thinking provides undergirding for both gay and lesbian agendas besides much else.

- ***The plastic self***

Plastic man is not simply psychological. He is, in Trueman's words, 'a man who thinks he can make and remake a personal identity at will'.⁹

⁶ Trueman page 129 ⁷ Compare 2 Timothy 3.2

⁸ Contrast Matthew 5.27-30; Romans 8.13 etc.

⁹ Trueman page 164

The foundations for such thinking were laid by the philosophers Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Karl Marx (1818-1883), and by the scientist Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Nietzsche is famous for his grim atheism which saw life as a power struggle and invites us to rise above human nature and become Übermensch (overman). Marx saw industrial production and capitalism as not only changing society but reshaping people themselves and how they related to one another. Human nature is therefore plastic or malleable. Human nature is reduced from being a 'given' to being a product of the times, an historical phenomenon. It is not fixed.

Darwin's account of human origins reinforced this. People must accept that they are mere accidents of evolution and therefore not made in order to fulfil any kind of destiny. Darwin blurred the lines between the human and the animal and removed any idea of humanity having special status. We are ever evolving. We are a plastic species.

- ***The sexual self***

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of psychoanalysis, is a key figure in this story. He equated happiness with 'genital pleasure'. This is the point at which personal identity became equated with sex and sexuality. Now that idea dominates the Western world – with people categorized according to their sexual desires: gay, bi, straight etc. For many, this is the most prominent truth about who you are.

If for Rousseau the natural man was innocent, for Freud the subconscious of human beings is dark, violent and irrational. For Freud, the job of the psychoanalyst was to excavate the unseen forces that live within us and bring them to the surface of consciousness. It is interesting that the inspiration for psychoanalysis was classical mythology (the Oedipus complex etc.)¹⁰. In his book *Selfie*, Will Storr cites an expert as saying 'without the myths of ancient Greece... there would be no psychoanalysis'¹¹.

Freud places the sex drive at the very core of what it is to be human.¹² Before Freud sex was for procreation and pleasure, Proverbs 5.19, - now it is who we really are. The happiest person is the one who is able to constantly indulge his or her sexual desires. However, this plays into the hands of powerful individuals, so

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 4.4 ¹¹ Storr, page 113

¹² It should be noted that if sex is at the centre of what it is to be human then children have to be sexualized. This is where the agenda for sex education to be pushed earlier and earlier comes from.

we need civilization to curb this. So from a Freudian perspective, according to Trueman, 'it means that it is impossible for the civilized to be truly happy'¹³.

- ***The sexually politicized self***

Freud's ideas were later used to change the classic understanding of oppression. This is another crucial move in the story.

Because identity is about our inner self, especially our sexual desires, then victimhood becomes psychologized. The idea that oppression is about poverty or physical mistreatment is eclipsed. It is, in this case, those who feel unable to express their sexual desires, or whose sexual desires are deemed unacceptable by society, who are the oppressed. Oppression is about emotions.

Sex is no longer a private activity because it relates to our social identity. To outlaw or merely tolerate gay sex, for example, is to outlaw or merely tolerate a certain identity. It hits at the very heart of who a person believes themselves to be.

Many university humanities departments have adopted so-called 'Critical Theory'¹⁴ and have latched on to this new angle on victimhood and oppression. The New Left interprets traditional sexual codes as a malign strategy for maintaining the status quo in society. Western ideals must therefore be overthrown. The family is the authoritarian state in miniature. Dismantling the family is now, therefore, thought by many to be essential for political liberation. Sexual revolution is the way to achieve this. And this agenda is pushed even further by the philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). Values such as tolerance are a sham, and simply a way of pacifying people to accept the patriarchal, capitalist power structure. The fight must be against educational institutions which teach tolerance. The New Left and it alone is equipped to see through the false claims of Western liberal democracy and consumerism and sexual freedom can be used to destabilize and bring them down.

Identity and community

Desire for inner happiness and psychological well-being lie at the heart of the

¹³ Trueman page 164

¹⁴ Trueman summarizes the basic tenets of Critical Theory as follows: 1. The power can be divided between those who have power and those who do not; 2. The dominant Western narrative is really an ideological construct to preserve its own power structure; 3. The goal of Critical Theory is therefore to destabilize this power structure by destabilizing its dominant narratives that are used to justify it. (This includes things like natural gender, family and church - JB).

modern era. This can be seen in the language of 2 Timothy 3 in terms of people becoming lovers of themselves. It is all about feeling good about yourself and making others feel good where possible.

As we have seen, it is now accepted that the way you see yourself, your inner image of yourself, is the true you. This even takes precedence over one's body.¹⁵ This opens up the possibility of a difference between your biological sex and your gender. It is who you think you are that is your real identity regardless of whether you have XX or XY chromosomes. Hence the statement, 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body', now makes sense.

However, for one's identity to flourish it needs acknowledgement by others. The technical term is that identity is dialogical, i.e. it relies on language which is only developed through interaction with others. We are relational beings. We need the acceptance of other people in order to be comfortable with ourselves.

This means that society must serve the purpose of meeting the psychological needs of the individual. This is therapy culture. All institutions and communities (including the church) must adapt to reflect a therapeutic and inclusive mentality.

Trueman tells us: 'The refusal by any individual to recognize an identity that society at large recognizes as legitimate is a moral offence, not simply a matter of indifference. The question of identity in the modern world is a question of dignity. For this reason, the various court cases in America concerning the provision of cakes and flowers for gay weddings are not ultimately about the flowers or the cakes. They are about the recognition of gay identity and, according to the members of the LGBTQ+ community, the recognition that they need in order to feel that they are equal members of society.'¹⁶

This explains why the faithful church, upholding Biblical teaching on gender, sexual intercourse exclusively within marriage between a man and woman, and the goodness of the traditional family is unlikely to be simply ignored. The Bible draws lines where current secular ideology wants no lines. As with so many other things in which we all fail, same-sex attraction and the confusion of gender does not fit with God's good creation and therefore, in the long run, will not cause individuals or society to flourish. We face trouble.

¹⁵ This means that theologically the modern outlook can be classed as a form of Gnosticism.

¹⁶ Trueman summarizes

3: Eroticism, the therapeutic and transgender

Sex and sexuality now dominate the Western world.

In his book, Trueman next highlights three ‘triumphs’. These explore *first* how the erotic is pervasive in modern life; *second* how especially crucial legal decisions are now made on the basis of emotivism and aesthetics; and *third*, how transgenderism has made headway in society.

Eroticism

The sexual revolution has meant that, from TV soap operas to teenaged pop music, our culture is now saturated with sexual themes.

The prevalence of pornography is especially noteworthy. Here, of course, technology has played a part. If freedom and happiness are encapsulated in sexual satisfaction, then online pornography becomes the obvious, the easiest and the most private (it seems) medium of liberation and fulfilment.

Pornography epitomizes the sexual revolution because it presents sex as merely recreational – a physical, pleasurable act that is divorced from any greater relational significance or transcendence. It detaches sex from any ethical context.¹⁷

And attitudes have changed. Pornography is no longer seen as an example of male dominance and violence against women. There is even talk of ‘ethically sourced’ pornography – that is where women are not in any way coerced to participate and the ‘rights of performers’ are respected.

Trueman says: ‘The philosophical claim I am making here is that the normalization of pornography in mainstream culture is deeply connected to the mainstream culture’s rejection of sacred order. Pornography carries with it a philosophy of sex and of what it means to be human that is inimical to traditional religious perspectives, in the West’s case primarily Christianity. It is therefore both symptomatic and constitutive of the de-created, desacralized world that emerges in modern times, with roots in Rousseau and Romanticism, and given sharp expression in philosophical and scientific idioms by Marx, Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud and the New Left. The triumph of pornography is both evidence of

¹⁷ This is the impression given, even though pornography is often related to depression, suicide and sex-trafficking.

the death of God and one of the means by which he is killed'.¹⁸

It is a 'deathwork'. Some sociological research shows there is a clear link between pornography use and the rejection of traditional religious belief particularly among teenagers.

The therapeutic

Earlier in his *opus*, Trueman referred to the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and his book *After Virtue* which argues that modern moral theories are incapable of explaining the rational authority of moral norms. Into this void left by the failure of modern ethical theory has stepped what MacIntyre termed 'emotivism' – in which all evaluative judgments / moral judgments are 'nothing but expressions of preference of attitude or feeling'.

Here we are back with emotions and aesthetics being the main informers of conscience, as advised by the Romantic poets. This is where morality and ethics ends up in 'the last days' described in 2 Timothy 3, where people are lovers of themselves and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. 'Essentially emotivism presents preferences as if they were truth claims'¹⁹. This is therapy culture in the courtroom.

As we saw earlier, all of a society's institutions must adapt to promote the psychological well-being of the individual. This has now entered the realm of the judiciary.

Commenting on the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* from which the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in the USA, Trueman says that the ethical logic used was mere emotivism consonant with the attitudes of sexualized therapeutic culture.

He writes concerning the judgment: 'It is emotivism. Those parts of tradition that support contemporary tastes are proof positive of the correctness of the opinion; those that are not useful in supporting the desired conclusion or that stand in opposition to contemporary tastes can be dismissed as outmoded or motivated by bigotry or simply ignored. And the court can safely do this because it is speaking to a society at large that thinks precisely the same way. The ruling and its supporting arguments are absolutely connected to, and dependent on, the changes in thinking about selfhood, human nature, sexuality, and the nature

¹⁸ Trueman page 297

¹⁹ Trueman page 85

of oppression and liberty that we have traced...earlier.²⁰

Transgender

We have seen that identity is now seen in terms of a self which is psychologized, sexual and able to create or recreate itself. This paves the way for the idea of a person who sees themselves as being of one gender trapped inside a body of another gender, (or indeed or no longer wishing to be categorized as either male or female). Such ideas are seen as coherent in a society which places a decisive priority on the psychological over the physical in determining identity.

The LGBTQ+ coalition stands together against the traditional sexual norms of society. Transgender people make common cause with lesbians, gay men and bisexual people because they perceive heterosexual normativity as the common enemy.

However, the coalition does not easily fit together. There are contradictions within it. Both gay men and lesbians, speak of themselves as being same-sex attracted. But that presupposes there are fixed genders. Those who argue for transgender and beyond do not accept the idea of fixed genders. They see gender on a spectrum and also as a fluid concept.

The status of transwomen (men who have become women) is a cause of acrimonious dispute among those older feminists who campaigned for women's rights. The classic feminists feel that the whole status of being a woman is undermined and depoliticized by transgenderism. Many feel that you cannot dissociate the female from female history and from the experience of what it is to grow up as a female physically. But 'being a woman is now something that can be produced by a technique – literally prescribed by a doctor'²¹.

Transgenderism seems to repudiate the significance of the body for selfhood (in-line with the way the self has been psychologized) and this means a repudiation of parents, the ones who conceived, gave birth to and brought up the little girl or boy.

Trueman quotes Germaine Greer: 'Whatever else it is, gender reassignment is an exorcism of the mother'.²²

²⁰ Trueman page 315

²¹ Trueman page 360

²² Trueman page 375

Transgender is a radical mentality which says, 'my identity is entirely of my own making'. Given the tacit atheism of Western society this is of course Poiesis rather than Mimesis.

4: What to think through

As we come to terms with this description of the sexual revolution and the world in which we now live, we ought to recognize that not everything about what is going on is bad. There are two things in particular which Christians would do well to note.

The *first* is dignity. ‘With Rousseau’s emphasis on the individual and the state of nature as the ideal, the shift to individual, intrinsic dignity is clear. And that is something with which the Christian should sympathize. We are not supposed to regard the life of a poor person as of any less value than that of a wealthy or important public figure’²³. But this dignity is detached from any sacred order. It is not rooted in all people being made in God’s image, James 3.9.

The *second* is authenticity. Though Trueman doesn’t say this, the concern of the sexual revolution for people to be outwardly what they are inwardly, does find a positive echo in the NT – not in a sinful way but in a godly way. A great theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is authenticity – that religious acts must come from the heart, and not be a sham, e.g., Matthew 5.27, 28; 6.1 etc. We can recognize a right a concern for honesty about oneself instead of hypocrisy. True conversion is about the inner heart being right, not just the outward actions.

But having said those things, there are other areas where Christians need to be extremely wary and discerning.

Engaging with LGBTQ+ issues

Much of what is involved in the sexual revolution the Bible calls sinful and perverted, Romans 1.26, 27. However, the issues are related not just to sex but to identity.

In particular, the Christian needs to beware of simply taking on the world’s way of thinking about and discussing these issues. Is the church meant to look ‘plausible’ to the world in its teaching about sexual ethics? If Scripture is right (which we believe it is) that the origin of the sexual revolution is the denial of God, how can that possibly be? How can the ‘God logic’ of humanity’s highest happiness being found in Christ and all else in our lives being subservient to that be made plausible in terms of ‘anti-God logic’? It is an attempt to square the circle. Our job here is to love all people and remain faithful.

²³ Trueman page 387

We can easily slip into using the categories of the world which are misleading and militate against clarity on key issues. The idea that our true identity is sexual is a category mistake. The Genesis account tells us that sex is a function of who we are, Genesis 1.28, not who we are, Genesis 1.27. The world's thinking here confuses ontology with something of teleology. Adam was a true human being before he ever had sex with Eve.

If the world's categories, represented by the acronym LGBTQ+, rest on a basic category mistake (that sexual desire is identity) should not the Christian critique this rather than simply engage with it or allow themselves to be defined within this framework? To concede the categories can be to concede the argument.

Trueman writes: 'The framework for identity in wider society is deep rooted, powerful and fundamentally antithetical to the kind of identity promoted as basic in the Bible'.²⁴

Sexual morality

The sexual revolution has been built on the idea that sex is meant to simply be recreational fun. The consequences of 'free love' have been handled / avoided through abortion and medicine. But deep difficulties have begun to emerge.

First, the 'free love' approach, as Freud foresaw, favours the powerful. This means men generally, but particularly there have been abuse scandals in which women and girls have been abused by rich and influential men. The #MeToo movement has rightly exposed this. The world recognizes the horror of these things.

Second, under the sexual revolution, sex is meant to be fine between 'consenting adults'. But as many court cases have found, defining consent is very difficult. What one partner took to be consent was not meant like that by the other partner. All this, even on its own terms, cries out for setting sex within a moral framework. But, of course, this is the last thing the sexual revolution wants to see. This will not serve, for example, the New Left's agenda of using sex to destabilize traditional Western norms.

²⁴ Trueman page 393

Gay marriage

The book *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear And Hatred of Gays*, by neuropsychologist Marshall Kirk and advertising executive Hunter Madsen, was published in 1989, and it advised the gay community that if it wanted to gain acceptance it needed to project a more cute and cuddly image of itself. Gay marriage has now arrived and has all the right therapeutic rhetoric and images on its side. It seems as if it is here to stay and faithful Christians will need to think through how to cope and address this fact.

It may be that its weakness will be the way that marriage has had to be redefined in order to make room for it. Perhaps the door has been opened by the legislation to other forms of 'marriage' which will not prove so appealing to the Western public. For example, does it make polygamous arrangements possible, which may well lead to the misuse and abuse of women?

When we mix same-sex marriage with transgenderism more problems arise. Trueman tells the story of a lesbian marriage in which one of the women changed sex to become a man. The partner was left in total confusion mentally. She now didn't know who she was. Was she a 'straight' wife married to a man? Or if she was a lesbian, why was she with a man in marriage?

Religious freedom

The United Nations, in paragraph 18 of its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, guarantees freedom of religion and freedom to change religion. But the expressive individualism of the sexual revolution is putting pressure on religious freedom.

The general decline in religious commitment in the West, and especially the loss of younger people from the churches, means that society doesn't care very much about religious freedom.

Religious people and Christians are vulnerable to having their freedoms curtailed if not removed. In the West, it is presently thought that sexual desire is the key to personal identity and therefore the dignity of every individual. This trumps religious freedom. Religious restrictions on sexual activity are seen as oppressive. This means that society sees the church as something it would probably be better off without.

The church is seen as an overwhelmingly white and middle-class institution and this does not help.

5: Responding as churches?

How are the churches to begin to respond to the situation in which they now find themselves? Some conservative evangelicals have simply continued their same old path hoping that the things we have discussed will simply go away or pass them by. That is unlikely to happen. Other churches have compromised on the Bible's clear teaching on sexual ethics or at least tried to create some 'wiggly room' for people to identify as 'gay Christians' etc.

Every pastor needs to open his Bible with humility and prayer as to how to best lead the church at this time. Here are three suggestions as to what we need to concentrate on.

Biblical identity

If Trueman is correct in seeing that the sexual revolution has been driven by a false understanding of the human self, then surely one of the first things that conservative evangelical churches ought to be doing is giving clear Bible teaching concerning human identity.

This will involve clear and convincing teaching which opposes atheistic evolution and underlines that humanity's true identity concerns the high calling of being made in God's image. We were made in the image of God and, fallen as we now are, redemption in Christ includes our taking off the old self and putting on the new self, 'which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator', Colossians 3.9, 10. Among other things this will include teaching on what it is to be the image of God, what it is to be fallen, what it is to be redeemed. Teaching on having a high view of the physical body will be important along with such things as a Biblical understanding of work, art, sexuality, ethnicity, justice etc.²⁵

Explicitly, when a young man comes to his pastor and says 'I think I'm gay' or a girl goes privately to her mother and confesses 'I think I might be a lesbian', along with love, the first response needs to be something like 'but you are so much more than your current sexual temptations'. The contemporary world narrows people down to their hormones – especially on social media. But human beings are gloriously so much bigger than mere sex machines. The whole history of mankind's achievements in science, art and humanitarianism shouts this from the rooftops. We are 'God's offspring', Acts 17.28. And pastor, our sermons must

²⁵ See for example *Re-enchanting Humanity: a theology of mankind* by Owen Strachan, Mentor Christian Focus, 2019

be such as to facilitate a prison breakout from the ugly solitary confinement of trivialized sensual humanity. Humanity is being trashed and we are called to rescue it.

Right and wrong

As we have seen, when people are lovers of themselves then what is good tends to be seen as what 'feels good' and bad what makes us 'feel bad'. And the church easily gets sucked into this way of thinking, because making people immediately feel better seems so loving – and love is indeed a Christian virtue.

But even common sense tells us that this is too simplistic. Chemotherapy for cancer does not make a sufferer feel good, but terribly bad, at least to begin with – but it is what they need if they are going to be cured. In spiritual terms, conviction of sin is not a nice feeling, but it does lead us to see our need of Christ and his cross and brings us to salvation, Acts 2.37.

Trueman writes: 'The church should reflect long and hard on the connection between aesthetics and her core beliefs and practices. I noted above that one of the hallmarks of ethical discussion today is its dependence on personal narratives...personal narratives (are) presented as incontrovertible precisely because they are personal testimonies – the highest form of authority in an age of expressive individualism. And this aesthetic concern reflects the perennial power of sympathy and empathy in shaping morality.... The church needs to respond to this aesthetic-based logic, but first of all she needs to be consciously aware of it. And that means that she herself must forgo indulging in, and thereby legitimating, the kind of aesthetic strategy in the wider culture. The debate on LGBTQ+ issues within the church must be decided on the basis of moral principles, not the attractiveness and appeal of the narratives involved...That is not to say that pastoral strategies aimed at individuals should not be compassionate, but what is and what is not compassionate must always rest on deeper, transcendent principles'.²⁶

This really amounts to a call to the churches to come back to the Bible and its truths. Christianity is to be in the proper sense doctrinal and dogmatic.

²⁶ Trueman, pages 402-403

Church as family

As we have already seen, human selfhood depends on community. Our identity is at least partially constructed by our social interactions with others. We find ourselves amidst the sum total of our relationships and our social environment.

This means that if the church is to help people find and maintain their true identity, then churches must be communities which mirror and build the image of God in people. A church should not be cultish. It should be a home for true humanity. It should be a family. And there should be a deep humility, recognizing that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future, under Christ's kingship.

Churches which have chosen to operate as corporations or educational institutions, really miss the point of what the NT churches were like. The phrase 'brothers and sisters' really meant something. As the world misleads people about their true identity, this aspect of church will become increasingly crucial.