

# The Christian and Culture

## Week 1 Handout

### Introduction

Why this course?

What is the goal here?

- Our first goal is not to critique the culture, but to understand it (critiques will come later)

Talking about Culture

- What is culture?

*The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.*

- Where is the culture now?
- What is our relationship to our culture
  - o We do not stand outside of culture, looking in
  - o We are in culture, a part of it, and responsible for it

I. Key concepts to help us read the literature well

a. *Identity and the Self*

i. What is one's identity?

- One's identity is the complex reality of who someone is
- Human identity is bound up in a number of things
  - o Things intrinsic to our being – that we may not have control over (image of God, ethnicity, parents, etc.)
  - o Things we directly or indirectly influence shape our identity (decisions, job, spouse, etc.)
- Human identity is specified in relation to others

ii. What is the self? How do we think of the self?

- The 'self' can simply be a way of referring to our understanding and awareness of our identity, but that's not how the culture tends to use the term

- The 'self' as our culture uses it now, is usually meant by a deeper concept, the "true me," or, "What is the deepest part of who I am?"

#### *b. Expressive Individualism*

- Definition: Expressive individualism is the belief that meaning is found by giving expression to one's feelings and desires

*It is "The understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority." – Charles Taylor*

- Implications of expressive individualism
  - Expressive individualism prioritizes the good of individual people over the good of the collective
  - When it comes to individual identity, feelings and desires are at the center
    - The visceral is "more real" than the cerebral
  - The individual is supposed to *perform* life now, and discover who they are by "performing" their inner being
  - One's identity is not complete until their true self is "expressed"
  - Because of this, identity – not behavior – is at stake
    - When we think we are critiquing behavior (e.g. same-sex attraction), the world says that we are criticizing their identity
- What the Christian must remember...is that you and I are expressive individuals...

#### *c. The Social Imaginary*

- Recognizing the problem

"Why does the sentence, 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body,' make sense...to my neighbors, to the people I pass on the street, to coworkers who have no particular political ax to grind?"  
- Carl Trueman

- What is the social imaginary?

*The Social Imaginary describes the myriad of beliefs, practices, normative expectations, and even implicit assumptions that members of a society share and that shape their daily lives.*

- Charles Taylor

*The social imaginary is the way people think about the world, how they imagine it to be, how they act intuitively in relation to it...It is the totality of the way we look at our world, to make sense of it, and to make sense of our behavior within it.*

- Carl Trueman

*The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.*

- Charles Taylor

- Why is the social imaginary so important for us to understand?

*This is a very helpful concept precisely because it takes account of the fact that the way we think about many things is not grounded in a self-conscious belief in a particular theory of the world to which we have committed ourselves. We live our lives in a more intuitive fashion than that. The fact that "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" makes sense to Joe Smith probably has far less to do with him being committed to an elaborate understanding of the nature of gender and its relationship to biological sex than to the fact that it seems intuitively correct to affirm someone in his or her chosen identity and hurtful not to do so, however strange the particulars of that self-identification might have seemed to previous generations.*

- Carl Trueman