

Observations: The work of Carl R. Trueman from the perspective of ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples

Tuvya Zaretsky

Introduction

“How has the current highly individualistic, iconoclastic, sexually obsessive and material mindset come to triumph in the West?”¹

The current political sphere and cultural environment are tense. But be encouraged --- the fruit of your ministering is in serving people, especially Jewish ones in the redemptive power of the New Covenant, providing redemption from guilt and shame, reconciling them to God and bringing regenerating new life in Messiah Jesus.

Carl R. Trueman, Church historian and Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College, has written two recent books to help us better understand our cultural moment. Looking back to the start, 400 years ago, he described the new philosophical direction, psychological nurture and political scheming that have brought us to this time in which ideas that seem strange are a new *normal*, and that which is just weird is now pressed forward to be accepted as *legitimate*.

I'm doing two things with my time this morning. First, I'll try to tell you in schematic terms what Trueman sees. I hope I'll make enough sense to encourage you to read at least one of his two books. Then, I'll share some real life missiological impacts from my own current ministry to spark recognition of similar challenges in your own ministries in Jewish evangelism. I want to encourage us all to labor like we are “different tractors working the same field,” wheel to wheel, for the same harvest. I believe we need to reengage the North American Jewish community, as a *countercultural* community, with compassion, patience and with courage. Now to the recommendation that you read one of Carl R. Trueman's recent offerings.

Carl R. Trueman

Church historian, Carl R. Trueman, is Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College. He has proposed a plausible scenario behind the dramatic culture changes in the West. While the outcomes he describes, starting with the heartfelt declaration, “I am a woman trapped in a man's body,” sound like lines from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, it is very much a reality today. Trueman examined the centuries-long process of the *cultural change* forces that are having such a powerful impact on contemporary American life. We here are culture change agents for Jewish evangelism. We need to recognize those opposing influences and be ready to meet them with reason. We've got to develop our ability to assess the philosophical premises of our conversation partners, serve them in areas of their interest and then introduce the spiritual hope, that is rooted in our counter culture Gospel in ways that are appropriate.

In 2020 Crossway published Carl Trueman's, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*.

Andrew Walker, associate professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist theological

seminary, called it, “the most important cultural book of the year (maybe even decade).² In 432 pages of densely compacted information, Trueman explained how modern-day activists have re-formulated a concept of the “Self” that has been sexualized and then politicized as a weapon for nothing less than a revolution in Western society. His apparent audience were academics, pastors and serious thinking Christians with enough time to digest his excellent and thorough scholarship. Thankfully, his friend at the heritage foundation, Ryan T Anderson [and author of *When Harry Became Sally* – a book that was banned on Amazon...you can borrow my copy] convinced Trueman to write a more user-friendly and shorter version in 2022 for a broader Christian readership. I’m commending Trueman’s shorter and more popular format, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*,³ All 192 pages are worth the time for anyone who are interested understanding our challenges and in communicating the Gospel with our contemporary audiences.

In *Strange New World*, Carl Trueman has taken a mountain of historical facts and presents them like an unfolding story. In that story, ordinary people in the cultural West will realize they are amid a revolution. Trueman explains how philosophers, sociologists, political thinkers, artists and psychologists have promoted a narrative of the “Self,” rooted first in an inner awareness of subjective ethnics that are set upon feelings. Advocates jettison the established biblical narrative of *creation, fall, redemption and consummation or restoration* as Christopher Watkins tells it.⁴

Scenes from this revolution first appear in the Garden of Eden at the fall. Behind the rebellion is a spiritual force that opposes the Creator God. Trueman sees in the scenario, image bearers of God who are enticed to think of the “Self” as one of their own creation and imagination. That alternative idea of the Self has taken shape over time and has widely been accepted and broadly taken for granted.

Trueman relates that story in three acts. In the Foreword, his friend Ryan Anderson describes those beats this way.

“At the risk of oversimplifying what Trueman accomplishes, I would summarize the broad arc of his work as an account of how the person became a self, the self became sexualized, and sex became politicized.”⁵

Act I – The New Idea of Self

The story begins with the way historic personalities reimagined the “self.” Trueman credits Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a father of the French Revolution, as the first intellectual figure to lead an inner-directed search for meaning without God and an unencumbered moral authority. As Rousseau pursued liberty, he imagined it a life that was without any obligation to, or restraint from a ruling class, the church or from God. Rousseau’s philosophical contribution was this idea of a “modern self,” answerable only one’s feelings as its highest authority. For him, morality came from within.

Rousseau is infamous for having given to an orphanage the five children he fathered with his mistress. His only concern was they would likely receive an inferior education while disregarding likelihood of their early deaths.

In the Bible, individuals like Job, King David and Jonah write about their interior life. The Psalms describe thoughts and emotions associated with their conscience and awareness of their moral standing with God. However, their self-awareness takes them in an outward direction. Their response to inner brokenness leads them to praise God's covenant faithfulness, His mercy and grace. Biblical personalities are moved to worship, love and serve their Lord creator. That was the "encumbrance" that Rousseau stood to oppose.

Act II – The Triumph of the Therapeutic

Rousseau's concept of a modern self, unlimited by external moral authority, may seem like a long way from the sexual revolution. Yet Carl Trueman carefully connects the data points through additional revolutionary thinkers. He brings out contributions from Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, who "followed the science" through advances in technology, romantic ideas flowing from arts and entertainment and a sexualized psychology. Woven together over time, these methodically transformed how ordinary people have come to accept reimagined selves as masters over their destinies and have changed their identities even defying the laws of nature in their bodies. Describing these malleable *plastic people*, sociologist Robert Bellah speaks of "expressive individualists." What Truman calls the "group think" of cultural agreement.

Others who helped push the secular humanist narrative included 20th Century Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. He coined the phrase "the *social imaginary*" or what others might say is "trending right now," the current cultural mindset. Their change agents came from the arts and entertainment - music, art and poetry of the Romantics. Later, secular life and love could be played out in movies and introduced in technological developments like the automobile, internet or birth control pills.

The outcome, said Taylor, is that western society moved away from Christianity and religious faith and now *imagines* the remaining adherents as "deficient exceptions." Hence the recent incident of a School Board Chair who sought to silence a group of Christian parents, calling them "Cristo-Fascist Terrorists" The new commonly held understanding, or *social imaginary*, seeks legitimacy for a new cultural order where people believe they are no longer "encumbered" by laws of nature, social order or the morality of the Creator God. We note the current social changes in attitude toward pornography, same-sex marriage, sexual identity and gender fluidity. Carl Trueman observed, "It has also moved from being primarily of personal significance to also being political, given the intensity of debates around abortion, birth control, and LGBTQ+ matters."

What Trueman describes as an historic process is showing up in American schools today. I recall vividly the moment our oldest son described at his California high school class almost two decades ago. His Sociology teacher declared, "There is no objective or universal truth." During the class discussion he ask respectfully, "Ms. M., do you mean what you said as just your opinion, or is it something you believe is true for everyone?" He told me, her eyes grew large and then filled with tears. Her only response was to ask if they class heard what Jesse had said. Then she dismissed the class. On his way out, some of his classmates chided him, "Way to go, Jesse. You made Ms. M. cry."

The "Social imaginary" or current cultural mindset has shifted to a self-validating idea of truth. If something feels right as a matter of morality it must be true. In contrast, since the first century, Christians repeat Jesus words, I am the way, the truth and the life." "No one come to the Father, but through Me." We, the voices of the Gospel among Jewish people today, are still a marginalized minority, but there is no force that can ever "cancel" that message or the One who is "the Truth."

Act III – The Politicization of Sex

At this point, Trueman draws in on what is behind some of the bewildering and disorienting changes that we see in contemporary culture. How did the internalization of the Self and secularized ethics lead to people who say, "I'm a woman trapped in a man's body?" How could an NCAA level athlete compete one year on a men's college swim team and the very next win a national swimming championship while identifying as a woman? How has it become not only possible, but unpopular to deny, that a man named could present himself as a woman and now serve as Secretary of Health and Human Services in a presidential cabinet post?

It is the secularized view of the inner life, centralized around sexuality and making identity a key ingredient for political change that produced in recent years an activist population who see themselves as "pieces of living playdough attached to a will."⁶ Shane Morris described how, "Millions of our neighbors now believe...that human beings can sculpt themselves into whatever they desire, if necessary (doing it), through hormones, surgery and legislation."⁷

Once philosophers and thinkers redefined the human purpose apart from the Creator God / who gave us worth and dignity/ they redefined human value by what could be acquired in material terms, or status in terms of power, or personal attractiveness that was wrapped in sensuality and infatuation. Carl Trueman carefully presents the ideas of artists, musicians and poets of the Romantic period to show how culture is shaped by aesthetic influences.

Here the work of Sigmund Freud enters the story of how the modern Self became sexualized. In Freud's view, the sexual drive is the paramount counter force of a secular view where humanity is said to be perennially discontented but remarkably creative as self-wielding agents for social change.

Herbert Marcuse, called by some “the father of the New Left” and Marxist scholar, understood the potential political force in application of Freud’s views. Trueman described his thinking that the rich are an oppressive force in society. They impress social codes to maintain the patriarchal nuclear family. They block true liberation. Therefore, the political or economic shattering of sexual codes is a principal task of the political revolutionary. Attack and dethrone God, unite the victim class, destroy the nuclear family.

Side note, I first heard of Herbert Marcuse in the turbulent period between 1968-1970 while on a college campus. The US was enduring tremendous political upheaval, bitterness over the foreign war in Viet Nam; civil unrest was roiling over unjust treatment of blacks; a heartbreaking inter-generational fissure ruptured over changing cultural styles, sexual liberation and rampant drug use. Jeannie Friedman, a Political Science professor from Brooklyn came to campus as a staff colleague, at least ten years my senior. Jeannie was a committed socialist and experienced political activist. She introduced me to the writings of Saul Alinsky and Marcuse. She introduced me to her political friend and invited me to join the advance of the socialist revolution. Unfortunately for Jeannie, a spiritual “revolution” was breaking out in America simultaneously in 1969 and 70. It was a close call, but I’m thankful that the Lord got me first.

Carl Trueman has traced these influences that are now baked into western culture as they yield evermore creative ways to break and expand sexual boundaries. Removing sexual taboos has resulted in the mainstreaming of pornography, the legalization of same-sex marriage and transgenderism. There is a spiritual darkness to all of this, but it does shed light to help us understand better some of the motivations of people we meet and minister to today.

Strange New World is descriptive story. Trueman does offer some prescription for what to do about it. I’d like to take some time now to describe what I’m seeing from implications during this cultural moment. How can we be effective agents of hope and healing for those who are imprisoned in darkness? Our God called us to be in this world but not of it. So, I think our calling is to be strong spiritual influencers in this strange new world.

Missiological Reflections

Two general observations from the work of Carl R. Trueman.

First, Trueman has exposed the sexual revolution as spiritually, the long-standing satanic scheme to confuse and orphan God’s creation from our Creator. And on its political front, the sexual revolution is founded on the moral absurdity of secular progressivism.

Trueman's analysis has shown that the end game of both lines of attack turn human attention inward to seek moral truth in the heart of man. Scripture tells us, "The heart is deceitful above things, and desperately wicked."⁸ Darkness and confusion, not morality and truth, are found within.

So, the people we meet who are making foolish life choices, pursuing their most authentic self, are chasing for something they will never find within. Keeping this in mind should stimulate our compassion for those who know nothing but the way of darkness. May we patiently care for them, while ministering to hearts that may YET turn to the light. The Lord created our hearts to love him. Nothing else can satisfy that longing.

Another observation is Trueman urged his readers to "form counter-culture communities that will shape our right intuitions and those of generations after us, in a biblical direction." In opposition to the narcissistic pursuit of the modern self, we need to model our dependence on the full sufficiency of God's power in his Holy Spirit at work according to the New Covenant and working out through us.

I find in my ministry a growing tendency to speak of people as "image bearers," created by a God who has invested all with dignity and worth. Even while we are broken sinners, he loves us, gave himself up for us, and -- as believers - He will continue to forgive us in the abundance of his righteousness.

Implications in Ministry

In case you don't know me, my focus for the last 18 years has been working among Jewish-Gentile couples to propose spiritual harmony in Messiah Yeshua. My interest started in 1990 when I read the National Jewish Population Survey that documented the intermarriage trend in Jewish culture. It surprised me and I didn't understand the challenges those couples were facing. So, I started asking.

Thirty-three years later, with 47% of all American Jews intermarried, in 2021 Pew Research observed the RATE of Jewish intermarriage is 61% and minus the Orthodox that number is 72%. And more telling for the future of American Jewry: Among married Jews - who themselves had only one Jewish parent, 82% are marrying a non-Jewish spouse.

Perhaps attempting obscure the rapid decline and changing identity the community, demographers are tinkering with the operational definition of "who is a Jew?" They develop categories like, "matrilineal," "patrilineal," "Crypto or secret-Jewish," "Jews by choice," or "members of the community" like the "mixed multitude" that came out of Egypt with Israelites in Exodus. Some "Jewish population" counts include to all the members of a "Jewish household."

Impacts and practical responses

Christian morality: One of the direct outcomes of the sexual revolution is the frequency to meet Christians, who question traditional sexual morality. How many times have we heard from a Christian, more often a woman, who contacts us because they have been dating, or may now be living with or are about to be married to someone who's Jewish and not a follower of Christ. How they got there is less important than the risks to their faith and the testimony of Messiah their partner.

Often, they are asking, "Should I convert for the sake of my Jewish partner?" Most don't understand the cost required in formal conversion to Judaism. It is only at the point that they realize they are expected "give up all prior faith including in Jesus" that most balk and begin to reassess their decision.

Risk to their Faith: Others have heard the scriptural caution against "being unequally yoked with an unbeliever." They wonder if that is a suggestion and not a commandment. We owe it to them to point to biblical passages like Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5 that warn against marrying those who do not love the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because they will "turn the hearts of the people away from the Lord."

Marriage God's idea: For the Christian who asks, "Can I marry someone Jewish who doesn't share my faith in Jesus?" In conversation, take them back to Torah and God's idea for marriage. We can remind them of their true self in Messiah. "Do you pray, opening your heart to your Savior and listening for his Spirit. When you pray, is that a place of great vulnerability and trust for the Savior who loves you? Can you share your belief in the God who loves you and that intimate communion with your unbelieving partner?"

Deborah's Story: Only a few days ago, I interacted with a woman who contacted us on our Jewish-Gentile Couples Facebook page. She wrote, "When I started dating the man who became my husband, I was a believer. I thought I could just share with him about Yeshua, and he'd believe. But that did not happen. I ended up marrying him anyway and ended up away from the Lord. I considered converting to Judaism but couldn't do it because of my [self-induced] "confusion" about who Yeshua is. I was not confused, I just wanted to marry the man." The Scriptures brought Deborah back to clarity. In the Torah, God gave us marriage as a way of being fruitful, multiplying and exercising his dominion upon the earth. The Bible renewed her understanding of the reason God has given sex and marriage. Now she writes, "I recommitted myself to the Lord and will never go back. I know God has forgiven me, and can redeem any situation, but I'm still going through the consequences of my earlier decision. With that I bear the sadness of my husband's unsaved condition and our being spiritually separated."

A Counterculture Community of Faith

As proponents of Jewish evangelism, we are change agents. And I think God is calling us to do the work of cultural discipleship. We're not standing on the sidelines pointing out problems and judging everybody else. We are engaging the confusion of this strange new world with the truth that "God always leads us in his triumph in Messiah and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place." 2 Corinthians 2:14.

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 Director, Jewish Gentile Couples Ministry
 Jews for Jesus

tuvya.zaretsky@jewsforjesus.org

¹ *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. (Wheaton: Crossway) 2020 p. 36

² Andrew T. Walker, "Review: 'The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self' by Carl Trueman." The Gospel Coalition, November 18, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/rise-triumph-modern-self-carl-trueman/>

³ Trueman, Carl R. *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway) 2022. Pp. 192

⁴ Christopher Watkins is senior lecturer in French studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Author of *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic), 2022. Pp. 648

⁵ Trueman, Carl R. *Strange New World: How thinkers and activists redefined identity ad sparked the sexual revolution*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway) 2022. p.12

⁶ Ibid. p. 53

⁷ Shane Morris, *Review: Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*. The Gospel Coalition Review February 2, 2023. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/strange-new-world>

⁸ Jeremiah 17:9