

## **Expressive Individualism: Who Am I, and How Am I Sure That's Who I Am?**

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Certainty: Absolute Truths that Produce Joyful Assurance

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We have all seen the look of confusion. Dementia is a horrible disease that impairs the mental processes. There are memory disorders, personality changes, and impaired reasoning. This not only seems to be a true medical problem, but it can also be true spiritually. Consequently, I would like for all of us to seriously consider these two questions in the title: who am I, and how am I sure that's who I am?

Carl Trueman is the professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College. Trueman has put together a wonderful book entitled *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*. In this book, he traces the changing definition of what it means to be human, and he claims that *expressive individualism* is a hallmark of being a modern person. In reference to philosopher Charles Taylor, Trueman defines *expressive individualism* as the way in which “each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires” (46).

It is a type of psychology that sees oppression as anything that keeps me from expressing my true inner self. Thus, if someone is a male and has desire to have sexual relations with a female, no one should stop him from expressing his desires. On the other hand, this also means that if someone is a male and he desires to have sexual relations with a male, no one should stop him from expressing his desires. What this philosophical and psychological development does is lead to a distinction between who you feel you are on the inside and what your body says you are on the outside. Hence, you get people who feel on the inside that they are female, but their body says that they are male.

The prolific nature of this kind of complexity and confusion is why a passage like [1 John 3:11-18](#) is so helpful. This passage teaches us how to know for sure we are who we say we are. Hence, the question:

Who am I, and how am I sure that's who I am?

# The Importance of Context

Context is what makes you understand the meaning of what you are reading. When you are putting a puzzle together, sometimes you see one piece and know it is important, but you need the rest of the picture. Context is what gives you the rest of the picture, so you see how it all fits together.

## Historical

- (1) There was a lack of assurance because false teachers had left the body - [I John 2:19](#)
- (2) The false teaching of these individuals denied the humanity of Jesus Christ - [I John 2:22](#)
- (3) The false teaching of these individuals allowed for a life that was inconsistent with whom they claimed to be. - [I John 3:18](#)

## Human

- (1) Humans have the ability to self-deceive - [I John 1:8](#)
- (2) Humans need absolute truth to be assured - [I John 2:3, 10](#)
- (3) Humans need divine indwelling for assurance - [I John 2:20, 27](#)

Because we are so easily deceived by our own hearts and by those around us, it is imperative that we know absolute truth that assures us. **Jesus is the Absolute Truth: Logos and Light.** Who Jesus is and what Jesus says is always true even when it contradicts what we feel and what we tell ourselves.

*Who am I, and how am I sure that's who I am? You know who you are because...*

## I. You are expressing a distinct love - [I John 3:11-13](#)

- › My love for God and Christian brethren will automatically lead to reception of hatred in our world.

There are two commands in our paragraph. The first of these commands is found in [I John 3:13](#):

**1 John 3:13 KJV 1900**

<sup>13</sup> Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

Don't be astonished! The apparent activity of the false teachers had caused these believers to lack assurance and joy. Notice the teaching of these verses, and how this teaching leads them to NOT be astonished at hatred. The command to love is not new to these people, but it needs to be contrasted. Notice how Cain is described: a child of Satan, a murderer who butchered his brother, and a man of evil works.

**1 John 3:11-12 KJV 1900**

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> Not as Cain, *who* was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

The command is interesting. **The apparent astonishment is based on the hatred from the world.** Remember that this world system is characterized by lusts of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

- › So, if the world is driven by sexual immorality, gluttony, covetousness, consumerism, materialism or personal status, it should not rock our identity if they hate those who are increasingly consumed with love for God and love for the church.

Which family tree are you a part of, a child of God or a child of Satan? Christian, are you placing too much stock in what unbelievers think about you and your Christianity? Christian, what do you expect from those who may be biological family but are not truly spiritual family? Do you see that the love you have will lead to increasing distinction from our world?

*You know who you are because...*

## 2. You are expressing a sincere love - [1 John 3:14-18](#)

- › My definition of love for God and for Christians must be tested for clarity by gospel-love.

[1 John 3:14-15](#) again establishes the significance of what is being said.

**1 John 3:14-15 KJV 1900**

<sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not *his* brother abideth in death. <sup>15</sup> Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

Knowing that you are saved does not come by a date you wrote in your Bible, but by examining the love you are expressing towards brethren. But this is where things in our culture become a little murky. What is love, and why are we confused by what this means?

One of the apparent problems with their theology was that they were able to *love* in word but not in *deed*. **A love that has no evidence is not true Christian love**, but we are quite confused about what love is today. How do we define love? Is love defined differently for one individual than it is for another? How do we know that we are loving brethren correctly? **If I am not really sure what is meant by love, then I cannot have the assurance** I need about my own profession, nor can I have a litmus test for the professions of others. This kind of assurance is what is at stake, if we are unclear about love.

Here are four common ideas about love. The following examples will help us to further distinguish and apply what John is saying. These are common perceptions of or about love:

**(1) Conditional love** - the person with this perception of love is continually fishing for acceptance or for compliments. This person was possibly raised in a conservative home where perfection and performance were hammered deeply into their psyche. This individual is looking for love, though they might say that they have it. This person also struggles in relationships because he or she intuitively makes themselves out to be the victims. Self-victimization can garner sympathy more easily. This self-victimization is culturally a problem within our human nature and society. What's more is that this perception is evident within the Critical Theory Movement:

Pluckrose & Lindsay cite a book entitled *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* by Campbell and Morgan. In this book, the authors note that "In the victimhood culture, status comes from being seen as victimized and therefore eliciting support from sympathetic third parties" (229).

The reason I think this is common to even the person raised in a religious, conservative upbringing is because **self-victimization is deeply psychological**. In Critical Theory and Social Justice scholarship, **self-victimization is not primarily about the physical nature of abuse but about the abuse of ideas and words** — an abuse that is not based on absolute truth for all parties involved. The person who was taught to find love by performing looks for ways to gain the acceptance of others — an acceptance that I have seen lead people to make themselves out to be victims in their own minds, though not in reality. Whether this person knows it or not, their perception of love is conditional, though academically they would say God’s love is unconditional.

**(2) Lawless love** - this is the perception of love that equates *love* with no rules. This is common in teens and young adults.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a poet who lived between 1792-1822 and said, “Love [sexual love] withers under constraint...its very essence is liberty.” Trueman goes on to say, “Shelley believes that the purpose of life is personal happiness, which he defines as a ‘pleasurable sensation’...” (153).

This perception of love that sees restraint as an enemy to love is also an idea about love that can lead us into insecurity, lack of assurance, and hopelessness.

**(3) Erotic love** - this perception of love is the one commonly confused with lustful desires. This perception relegates love to the whimsical sexual or sensual desire that arises within the human heart.

Years ago, there was a movie called *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere (a rich man) falls in love with a prostitute. The plot line of the movie positions Richard Gere as a benevolent man who responds to a working girl in spite of her lifestyle. Gere enters into an illicit relationship with her in the movie.

Clips like this tend to confuse physical, sexual desire with an idea we might have about love. Our idea might be that love is when you love someone for more than what they can offer you. Really this is an incomplete idea of love. In addition, our understanding and definition for love often is influenced by

motion pictures, which confuse erotic love with the love we have experienced in Jesus. This confusion is often through the aesthetic or through appearances. The appearances are drafted to attract you and simultaneously lead you to fantasy-based ideas about love — fantasies that are not true.

**(4) Self-Love** - this phrase is misleading, but this perception of love is the one where the person goes on a journey of self-discovery. Once they come to some conclusions, they come out with those conclusions and desire (some demand) that others affirm who they say they are. This perception leads a person to see love as affirmation based on who they think they are psychologically and who they say they are verbally. Objective reality is irrelevant in this perception. If you don't accept them, then you don't love them.

Hence, the question of Christianity's loving God: "How can a God that is so loving not accept LGBTQ+?"

In the midst of all these ideas about love, we must see what John says. John points us to gospel-love.

### **(5) Gospel-Love**

#### **1 John 3:16 KJV 1900**

<sup>16</sup> Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.

The chief way we know who we are is that the **“love we know is the love we show.”** Notice, *“Hereby perceive.”* We KNOW the love of God because he laid down his life for us.

- God's love has material expression.
- God's love can be known.
- God's love changes us.

The test for me and for others is the test of gospel-love. How I know who I am, and how I am assured of who I am does not begin with my natural, fallen desires which are against God's Word. Who I am and assurance of who I am is proven by the kind of love that I manifest toward brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

**1 John 3:17-18 KJV 1900**

<sup>17</sup> But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels *of compassion* from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? <sup>18</sup> My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

You cannot separate gospel-love from knowing Christ.

You cannot separate gospel-love from knowing brethren.

You cannot separate gospel-love from laying down your life for both.

If you are the brother or sister in need, let your church family know. Let them express gospel-love to you. For those who've been radically changed by the gospel, keep laying down your life for the brethren. Find assurance in the outworking of gospel-love. Some of you are doubting your salvation because of circumstances. Turn your eyes to the gospel-love, and live out gospel-love towards your brethren. Some of you know gospel-love, but you are not proactively, practicing gospel-love. You should not be waiting for your perfect ministry to open up. You ought to lay down your life for the brethren. My final plea is to those who are unsaved. Turn from your sin and believe on Jesus Christ as your Lord before you enter eternity.

Expressive individualism says to look inside you to find out what you want and who you are. Gospel-love tells you who you really are, saves you in spite of who you are, changes you, and empowers you to practice that love.