# THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Engagement Topic: Rival Worldviews, Part 3 4<sup>th</sup> Semester I Spring 2025

## Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topics this week are consumerism, expressive individualism, and tribalism

## Worldview Analysis: Consumerism

Consumerism as a worldview is the assumption that life is defined to a significant degree by the buying and owning of material goods. Consumerism has been a tendency among Americans since the postwar economic boom of the 1950s. By the 1980s, it had become a dominant feature in much of the West. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expansion of global markets has exported consumerism to most nations, including some that remain politically totalitarian (e.g. China).

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

One of the most important problems with the world is that people don't have everything they need to flourish. There are many different reasons why people's needs are not met.

## (5) Can things ever get better?

The solution to our problem is increased access to material goods. For some people, this means basic necessities like food, clothing, and housing. For others, this means healthy food, better clothing, and more reliable housing. For many, this means modern conveniences—the more technologically advanced, the better. Wherever your starting point in terms of needs and wants, the direction is the same: greater accumulation and consumption.

(6) What is the good life?

The good life is largely defined by material prosperity however that is conceived. For the poor, it might be middle class financial stability. For the middle class, it



might be the financial freedom that comes with real wealth. For some, it's a dollar amount. For others, it's a career advancement path. For still others, it's a retirement strategy. For many, it's particular material goods—the newer, nicer, and more convenience they provide, the better.

(8) How do we live in light of what we believe to be true?

Human flourishing is tied closely to what we have. Therefore, we should be motivated to make money, accumulate goods, upgrade what we currently have to nicer versions, etc. Our economic vision is mostly about making it more possible for more people to have more things and thus flourish, so free markets and low prices are major priorities. In its worst form, consumerism is simply the desire to accumulate more stuff and nicer, which is rooted in idolatry and covetousness.

Consumerism can attach itself to a biblical worldview. In one sense, it simply plays off the universal human desire to be happy and the general sinful tendency for us to covet what others have. The most pervasive version of Christian consumerism is the **prosperity gospel**, which comes in two forms. The soft form of the prosperity gospel assumes that God wants to bless us materially, physically, and mentally. Deprivation, suffering, and illness are outside God's intentions for us. God rewards our hard work and good deeds. This soft form of the prosperity gospel is pervasive within American Christianity. It is influenced by our cultural myths such as the American Dream and societal commitments such as capitalism. It is a gospel of middle-class respectability and upward mobility.

The harder form of the prosperity gospel is more openly heterodox. This is the "name it, claim it" doctrine that is common (but not universal) within charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity. God saved us to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. We lack these things either because our faith isn't strong enough or because of some unconfessed sin issue in our lives. It has its root in the teachings of the late Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking*. This harder form of the prosperity gospel is taught in some of the largest churches in America, and it has been exported from America via television and the internet to much of the majority world. It is a gospel of accumulation and earthly happiness.

#### Worldview Analysis: Expressive Individualism

Expressive individualism is primarily concerned with selfexpression, self-discovery, and personal autonomy. We each craft our own unique identities based upon our deeply held beliefs, desires, and values. The seeds of expressive individualism go back to the Enlightenment, but it's more recent roots are found in existentialism and postmodernism. It often overlaps with consumerism. Another major influence is the widespread prevalence of therapeutic and behavioralist assumptions of modern psychology. Expressive individualism has become an important part of the baseline view of personal identity for most people in the Western world, and thus has an outsized influence on anthropology.

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

Too many people aren't able to be who they really are. This might be due to social convention. It might be due to some form of oppressive injustice. It might be due to bad choices some people make. It might be due to a lack of access to the means to fully realize your sense of personal identity. Whatever the cause(s), the outcome is the same: people aren't able to be who they know they really are deep down. Their identity is being squelched, perhaps coercively.

### (5) Can things ever get better?

The solution to our problem is removing obstacles to personal freedom of expression as a matter of social justice. Nobody should feel like they are trapped in an identity not of their choosing. Nobody should be defined by external authorities that they do not wish to acknowledge. As many people as possible should have the ability to decide who they want to be and how they want to be known. This should be a basic human right.

### (6) What is the good life?

The good life is being your authentic self, so long as it doesn't do any harm to someone else. If your authentic self is a woman, you should not allow your male genitalia or societal conventions about gender to define you as a man. If your authentic self loves to collect various types of guns and ammunition, no progressive politician should have the power to create any obstacles to your Second Amendment rights. If your authentic self is a stay-at-home mother, you should not be treated as a second-class citizen for choosing not to work outside the home for compensation. If your authentic self is a someone with ADHD, your company should have to accommodate your disability and never expect you to fulfill obligations you are unable to execute. You are unique, and you should not have to deny who you really are because of authorities or expectations external to yourself.

(8) How should we live in light of what we believe to be true?

We should do everything within our power to be true to our authentic selves. We should work for a society that is accepting of all people. Discrimination of almost any type is wrong and should be eliminated. Toleration is obnoxious because it still implies some identities are better than others. We should be working toward a society where nearly every identity is affirmed, celebrated, and defended.

Expressive individualism often attaches itself to a biblical worldview because it is in the air that we all breathe. A particularly common form of expressive individualism in Christian circles has been called "moral therapeutic deism." This is the idea that there is a God who created us and wants what is best for us, but he is relatively detached from our everyday experiences. The way we define what is best for us is determined more by cultural preferences than biblical authority. While we are all sinners in the sense that we do sinful things, much of what is wrong with us is really more about psychology and emotions and less about disobeying God or having malformed desires. To be a good Christian is to believe in God, be well-adjusted, and be a good person. Individual identity is sacred, and therefore should be at least tolerated, if not celebrated.

Moral therapeutic deism isn't Christianity. It is really a combination of a functional deism, everyday morality shaped by common values, and a therapeutic view of personal flourishing. These priorities are "baptized" with Christian language. At its best, this is a shallow understanding of the spiritual life among immature Christians who are in need of better discipleship. At its worst, moral therapeutic deism is a false gospel.

#### Worldview Analysis: Tribalism

Tribalism is in some ways the communal form of expressive individualism. Humans are drawn to community, and we naturally gravitate toward others with whom we share a common identity. Some of our tribes are chosen for us: our family, our schools as children and adolescents, our state and nation of birth and upbringing, etc. To varying degrees, we choose other tribes: religious affiliations, hobbies, political parties, occupations, fandoms. Tribalism is when our identity is defined to a large degree by our tribe, and our tribal loyalty significantly influences other parts of our lives. In more theological terms, tribalism is making an idol out of one's tribe and resenting other tribes. Tribalism expresses itself in many ways, ranging from fanatical fandom of your favorite team, to nationalism, to racism, to uncritical loyalty to a union, to identity politics.

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

The problem is really that your tribe is not given the place it deserves in the world, or one or more less-deserving tribes are elevated. The wrong sort of people seem to be winning, however that is understood.

### (5) Can things ever get better?

The solution is to right the wrong. For the nationalist, it means elevating the status of your nation at the expense of all others, because they are lesser nations. For the white supremacist, it means ordering society so that white people are always at the top, where they belong, and keeping ethnic and racial minorities in their place. For the critical race theorist, it means eliminating all influence of whiteness because of its inherently oppressive tendencies. For the LGBQT activist, it means pursuing a society where all people celebrate every form of sexual identity. For the tribal Republican, it means defeating every Democratic politician or Democratic policy proposal because of the inherent moral inferiority of Democrats. For the tribal secularist, it means eliminating the influence of religious truth claims from society.

### (6) What is the good life?

The good life is the flourishing of your tribe, often at the expense of other tribes that are seen as being in competition. You want to be part of the winning team.

(8) How should we live in light of what we believe to be true?

Remain loyal to your tribe. Advance your tribe's interests. Push back against the influence of competing tribes.

Tribalism is all too common among those who otherwise hold to a Christian worldview. Some believers and even churches are virtually aligned with a political party. Their political engagement is really rooted in combative identity politics. Other believers or churches interpret their Christianity through the lens of their racial or ethnic identity, whether they realize it or not. This applies to both conservative white supremacists and many progressives in minority groups. Still other believers believe that nationalism is simply patriotism, and they are suspicious of others who seem unpatriotic because they are less nationalistic. For Christian nationalists in our nation, there is a tendency baptize American identity, interpret American history using religious categories, whitewash American shortcomings, and assume that American interests are by definition correct. Countless Christians make everyday ethical compromises because of an unhealthy commitment to their occupation, or a hobby, or an athletic team. We all know believers who act like they are unbelievers when the referee makes a bad call or who spend more time and money than they should on their hobby.

### **Recommended Resources**

David S. Dockery and Trevin Wax, eds., *Christian Worldview Handbook* (Holman Reference, 2019).

James W. Sire, The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (IVP Academic, 2020).

Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (IVP Academic, 2009).