

Digital Discipleship 4 – Individualism

In those days *there was* no king in Israel; everyone did *what was* right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

The book of Judges is a book that illustrates many spiritual dangers. One is how wealth and success tend to lead to complacency which leads to idolatry, which in turn leads to poverty. Another of the dangers in Judges is the awfulness and terror that reigns when there is an authority vacuum. Judges records some of the most horrific scenes in all the Bible, and the lesson given is: there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It was the most terrifying time, precisely because of the absence of authority. “There was no king in Israel”. A king to provide direction for the nation, a king to uphold the Law, a king to punish evildoers, a king to protect the nation from threats. The only defence anyone had was their own, individual strength, their own wits, their own weapons. And as Judges shows, people don't do very well when left to themselves. People don't choose the right side, people lapse into what is easy and popular. With good reason the Bible describes us as sheep. We feel confident on the inside, so a man's way seems right in his own eyes, but we get lost. We get into bad places, which seemed right at the time.

One of the great dangers of the Internet is that it is shaping us to be people who trust in our own hearts, who make our own hearts the authority for truth, meaning and identity. It is a powerful shaper of individualism.

We don't often think about how the technologies we use begin to change and shape us. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, many people in Western countries could play a musical instrument. It was one of the ways that people would spend their recreation time, even as families. With the advent of the record player and then the radio, more and more people became consumers of music, but not producers. By the twenty-first century between 12 to 20% of people can play an instrument. Technology changed behaviour.

The car and the highway changed the way towns were laid out, which changed the way people did business, or schooling. The electric light changed the way people worked or acted at night, and changed even the hours people would sleep. Technology changes behaviour.

We've already talked about the internet's ability to affect our reading habits, our concentration spans, our ability to focus. But we sometimes fail to see that how we use the internet begins to shape our worldview.

Internet is fundamentally an individualistic, private experience, where one user, the user with the phone or laptop or tablet, controls the experience. I'm not discounting the fact that we chat with others online, or play games or interact. But each user controls what they see or hear. You select what you watch, listen to or read, and for how long. You can switch it off at any time, you can close the window or tab, navigate to something else. Yes, the algorithms keep suggesting things for you to click on, or scroll to, but it's still you deciding to watch this or that.

It's an entirely individualistic experience unlike previous electronic media. For example, those who grew up in the TV generation, would fight over the remote. There'd be an argument about what channel to watch, because that was the only screen in the house, and whatever was on it, everyone had to watch it, or just go do something else.

Even earlier, the radio generation would have whole families listening to one broadcast. Media was communal. But now an individual user with a screen is the absolute centre of that world, that experience.

Think about how powerfully the web teaches the doctrine of individualism.

First, I choose the content. I watch and listen to whatever I want for as long as I want. Because I have the power to listen or mute anyone and everyone, I have a kind of authority that I don't have in any other sphere of life. Where else could you hush anyone from speaking? What I watch or read is not some kind of curriculum, like you would get at school or university. It is not a curated collection, chosen by knowledgeable people, weeding out this, including that. No force, group, people, institution, tradition controls or limits the content. For the most part, it is following what appeals to me, what seems to make sense to me, what I like.

Second, I choose the meaning of the content. What I mean by that is the individual user is the one choosing all these things, and in some way, connecting it all. He interprets all these videos and shorts and songs and memes and podcasts and combines it all into an interpretation which makes sense to him. That's why many of the common phrases today are :

“You have to live your truth.” “Don't let anyone tell you who you are.” “I need to be authentic to myself.” “This is who I really am.” “If it doesn't feel right, it's not right for me.” Because I choose the meaning of everything I consume. So sometimes you find people consuming media that are almost completely antithetical to each other, but it doesn't matter, because the user decides to harmonise them and make them his own truth.

My own interpretation has also led to what people are calling the death of expertise.

“The radical democratization of everything has not only given billions of ordinary people a very real kind of power and voice; it has flattened the distinctions between one voice and another. Offline, a person's advanced degree, years of experience, or endorsement by a respected institution naturally create a distinction between the value of that person's opinion and the value of an average anybody. Further, this distinction—between an expert and a nonexpert—is propped up and reinforced by tangible structures that communicate the expert's qualifications, such as universities, certification boards, and political offices. In other words, in the analog world, society is set up so that while everyone is owed equal justice under the law, not everyone's insights or voices are considered equally valid or worthy of broadcasting.

The web is, in a very real sense, a credential-erasing environment. When everything and everyone is disembodied, these structural distinctions between expert and nonexpert tend to mean very little. What is meaningful are experiences. Online, personal narratives are the truly authoritative knowledge. Online, it doesn't matter so much who you are, what you've accomplished, or how much you know. What matters is your story. What matters is your truth.”

Third, I choose my identity. Not only can I choose the content, and the interpretation of the content, I get to choose who I am online. My story, my truth.

“to exist in a meaningful way in the online public square, you have to express yourself. You "like" that which interests you. You "share" those things that you enjoy or agree with. The center of gravity in the online world is your profile, in which you are granted a near-godlike ability to craft an identity. Who are you? The answer is whatever your profile says. Your profile picture can be filtered, edited, and adjusted so that you have total control over what everyone else sees when they see "you." No part of your social media life exists apart from your conscious self-disclosure.”

I can avoid or edit embarrassing things or things I don't like. This is a strange world of self-creation. Self-curation. In fact, while there has always been transsexuality and homosexuality, it is only in the last 15 years or so with the massive spread of social media on mobile devices, that we now have the universal language of “I identify as”. Or “I am a woman trapped in a man's body” That kind of

language only make sense to a generation who have been taught by the internet that you can create your own identity. You are whoever you say you are – no biological constraints, ethnic constraints. Identity is as fluid as my moods or whims.

And understand, once I decide on meaning, and I decide on my identity, if you disagree with me, you are not just debating ideas with me, you are attacking me. Disagreement is now viewed as hostility, even violence. That's why supporters of the identity movement become so hostile, because to debate over gender or sexuality is to invalidate their entire system of my content, my truth, my identity. You are seen not as a rational person trying to debate reasonable: you are like a vandal tearing down their inner world.

Choosing content, choosing its interpretation, and choosing my identity is training billions of people in the religion of expressive individualism.

1. The self is sovereign. The individual is the highest authority over meaning, identity, and purpose.
2. Authenticity is the supreme virtue. Being “true to yourself” outranks obedience, duty, sacrifice, or tradition.
3. Relationships are conditional. Relationships exist to support self-expression and are discarded if they inhibit it.
4. Morality becomes subjective. Right and wrong are defined by personal feelings rather than objective moral order.
5. Institutions must affirm identity. Church, family, and state are expected to validate self-defined identities—or be rejected.

This is the ultimate form of trusting your own heart, being wise in your own eyes. And this stands in stark contrast to biblical Christianity.

Expressive Individualism	Christianity
Identity is self-created	Identity is God-given
Inner desires are authoritative	Desires are to be ordered
Freedom = self-expression	Freedom = loving obedience
Authenticity = expressing self	Authenticity = conformity to Christ
Fulfilment through self-realisation	Fulfilment through self-denial and communion

Jesus’ words stand in direct contrast: “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23)

Now, how do we respond to this? You can't change the nature of the internet experience. You can't try to make it into something communal. You can't change the fact that the web will be calling on you to keep clicking and scrolling and following its suggestions. But what you can change is how you use the web. If you use it as if you are an autonomous creator of truth and identity, it will ruin you. But if you wisely use it as someone submitted to truth and to your identity in Christ, it can be wisely used.

So how do we do that?

First, we should curate the content we take in in submission to God's Word. In other words, our love of God's Word should control and limit what we are looking for and finding on the web. Growing in true biblical knowledge will enable us to know what to look for and who to look for on the web.

However, to learn discernment on the web, we must learn to discern trustworthy flesh and blood teachers. We do this the biblical way, by asking, Is he an example of true Christian piety (Hebrews 13:7)?

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. (Heb. 13:7)

Now why does God set this up as the test of trust? Because while Christians cannot always argue with the reason or learning of someone who claims to teach, they can easily judge if his life and manner matches his message. This is why the primary qualifications for a pastor or a deacon in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not his education and intelligence, but his life. You might not be able to argue with him over which view of the Trinity is correct, but you can judge if he is serious-minded, gentle with people, loyal to his wife, respectable in demeanour, hospitable, not controlled by substances or in greedy pursuit of money, whether his children submit to him, whether he is quarrelsome, or self-controlled. These passages and others are meant to get us beyond a man's winsomeness, humour, erudite learning, or command of theology and history. *How does he live?*, is the real question. Since a bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit, a bad man cannot ultimately guide God's people to what is healthy.

The character qualities God calls us to look for are eminently public and verifiable.

Here are some implications of this test: you have no reason to trust an anonymous writer on the Internet. However clever, creative, insightful the speaker or writer, from a biblical point of view, anonymous sources don't deserve your trust. You may choose to, but you certainly don't have to, and you have more reasons not to.

What about the teacher who is not anonymous, but is obviously thousands of miles away, and whose life is not accessible to you to scrutinise? He can have some benefit, but if his life is not available to you to peruse, you need to withhold the kind of trust you are commanded to give those close to you. Maybe that person has a church which holds him accountable. Great, that's better, but you're still not in that church.

The Internet now allows us to hear thousands of teachers worldwide with the click of a button. We've all benefited from that. But we now have the abnormal situation of hearing voices abstracted from character. We have people who sound like authorities, but we are never close enough to them to do these biblical checks.

Now this doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to sermons from excellent teachers overseas. But I think the biblical standard is this: the less access you have to observe the life, the less weight the person should carry in shaping your judgements. You should think of trusting biblical teachers in concentric circles. The people you trust the most should be those whose life you can observe in the flesh.

You do not merely discern the teaching, you discern the life. If you do not have enough access to discern the life, then you are not really in a position to know if this person is trustworthy enough to follow closely.

What this looks like is that I will prioritise flesh and blood Christian voices over disembodied ones. It doesn't mean you have to pretend that the flesh and blood preachers you know are better preachers than the Internet. It means your discernment will grow in the living, public, corporate context of the local church. From there, your discernment muscles are strengthening for the very solitary and private experience on the web. I start with submission to flesh and blood people, so that I counter the trend to think of myself as the great gateway of truth when I'm on the web.

2) Second, we and the people we listen to, should be submitted to a Christian tradition. In the case of a Bible teacher, he must be able to defend his position using Scripture, sound reason, and show that he submits to Christian teaching of the past. Can you evaluate his teaching against anything in the past? Does he seem to translate and pass on what has been tried and tested in the past, or is he boasting in his novelty and creativity? The saying is mostly valid: *what's entirely new is seldom entirely true, and what's entirely true is seldom entirely new.*

Tradition reflects the process of elimination and assimilation that people do over centuries. Human beings were not meant to do on an individual level in a moment what is meant to happen on the scale of entire cultures over hundreds of years: evaluate meaning, recognize authorities, and deliver a consensus. Of course, we must each make judgments, and trust certain voices, but we were meant to do so with the backing of tradition. Within a culture, judgments are passed on from one generation to another. People who have spoken well on an issue are pointed to, and younger consciences are formed as they are exposed to these judgments. People growing up within the bounds of a tradition had the safety of hundreds of years of judgments from which to learn. If your father's father's father said it was good, useful, dangerous, healthy, true, or false, there was good reason to listen. When we don't know, we must trust our betters. In a tradition, we knew who our betters were.

Certainly, tradition can be a great evil if it hands down false religion, poor judgments or liars held up as paragons of virtue. But most cultures have experienced some common grace and, therefore, some truth. Few traditions are completely useless. Cultures most exposed to the special grace of the gospel usually have (or had) more evidence of helpful judgments handed down.

What this looks like is that I resist the power of novelty on the web. I am interested not just in the new, but in the tried and tested. I am more interested in seeing the accumulated wisdom of Christians over the ages, than just looking for something new and exciting.

This helps me curate what I watch and listen to with something more than just "I feel like it" or "I like it". I'm measuring it against a standard bigger and older than "my truth" or "my story".

3) I submit to God's Word on my identity, and do not believe the illusion of the Internet that I can create my own. My identity is not what I make it, not what I construct, not what I present to the world. My identity is everything that God says of me. What God says I was before I was saved: a child of wrath, dead, corrupt, perverse. What God says happened when I was saved: justified, regenerated, washed, redeemed, freed, forgiven, indwelt, sanctified, reconciled, adopted. Who God says I am in Christ: His child, His servant, a co-heir with Christ, an ambassador for Christ, a Temple for God, God's workmanship, a new creation, seated with Christ in the heavenlies, members of His body, risen with Christ, citizen of Heaven, a pilgrim, salt and light, living stones, royal priesthood. I don't need influencers and podcasters to help me construct an identity. I have one in Christ.

The content I watch should not be self-driven. It should be submitted to a Christian, biblical pattern. It should be an extension of what you are submitting to in your local church.

The meaning you construe from this should not be your own meaning, but one that is biblical and reflects the consensus of Christians through the ages.

The identity you have should not be one you put together, but one you receive from God and submit to.

There is nothing more dangerous than the society where every man does what is right in his own

eyes. Christians need to live not by expressive individualism, but by a deep and submissive trust in God and His Word.