Who I really am

Baptist General Conference, Celebration
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Calgary
1 Peter 1:3 "… he has caused us to be born again to a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. …"
Target: 7,150 words which is 55 minutes at 130 words/minute

[Slide 1: Title Slide]

Our conference theme, "For such a time as this" is from book of Esther. And it comes from a time when the Jews faced an existential threat. The Jews were in exile, without political power, and Haman, a government official with a titanic ego, angry about a perceived slight from Mordecai, a Jew, had schemed and arranged for all the Jewish people to be exterminated. But there was one woman, Esther, also a Jew, who also, as a consequence of another big man's wounded pride, found herself in the position of Queen of the Medes and Persians, that is to say, she had the potential for influence.

Now Mordecai was Esther's relative. He had raised her, and so as the appointed time for the Jew's extermination drew near, he approached Esther to ask her to do some lobbying for the Jewish people, and this is where this little phrase comes from. Mordecai's message to Esther was:

> "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. **14** For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

In the Bible God is always the hero of the story. Mordecai himself was confident that should Esther refuse to help them that help would come from elsewhere. But, "for such a time as this" is code, it's a catch phrase, it is a

call to ordinary people to lean in, to step up, to take risks when there is great peril for God's people.

Now we don't face a Haman. We are not facing pogroms or exterminations. But the church is in decline in Canada, not in most of the rest of the world, but certainly in Canada.

I'm going to show you some charts, some stats that show the change, the decline of faith and religious participation — but not a lot of charts. Just enough for us to understand that the situation is serious. So that when we say for such a time as this, we understand this time.

So, let's look very quickly at the scale of the decline. To start, I'm going to show you two kinds of data. First, I'm going to show you the change in weekly religious service attendance. It's one measure, but generally it's pretty good measure because it's correlated with all kinds of other measures. Second, I'm going to show you the change in the distribution of Christian evangelical scale scores. The Christian evangelical scale, which was developed by Andrew Grenville, based on David Bebbington's quadrilateral, tries to measure the four peculiar emphases of evangelicals: Biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism. I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about the scale, but what you need to know is that the higher your score the more "Evangelical aligned" you are.

[Slide 2: Attendance]

Here is the attendance data. These are public opinion polls starting in 1946 after the Second World War. The last poll was done in September 2023. This is weekly attendance, for all Canadians, not just Christians. In 1946 67% of Canadians told George Gallup that they were in a place of worship during the last seven days. In September 2023 it was just 7%.

[Slide 3: Bebbington]

David Bebbington is a British historian whose book "Evangelicalism in Modern Britain" has had enormous influence on how evangelicals are understood and studied on things like public opinion polls.

Bebbington said evangelicals are Christians who have a “peculiar emphasis” on four things and together these are commonly called the Bebbington Quadrilateral. They are:

1. Biblicism: An emphasis on the Bible as our rule for faith and practice.
2. Conversionism: A believe that everyone must choose Christ.
3. Activism: This includes evangelism and good works.
4. Crucicentrism: An emphasis on preaching the cross of Christ.

In tomorrow’s talk we’ll talk about how true this still is. But for now, we’re going to look at the data collected on polls using Andrew Grenville’s Christian Evangelical Scale which was designed to measure Bebbington’s quadrilateral.

[Slide 4: CES 1996]

Now let’s look at the Christian Evangelical scale scores.

This first chart is from 1996. The scale goes from a minimum score of 8 on the left to a maximum score of 32 on the right. The different colours represent different traditions. Green is evangelical affiliates; red, Mainline Protestants, blue, Catholic; dark blue, English-speaking Catholics; light blue, French-speaking Catholics; yellow, Orthodox; and black, those with no Christian affiliation. Note the shape. It bulges in the middle, and evangelicals are mostly to the right, but there are other Christians there with us.

Now I’m going to show you the same data, but for different years. I want you to watch how the shape of these data changes.

[Slide 5: CES 2003]

Here’s 2003.

[Slide 6: CES 2019]

Now 2019. See the big shift over 16 years?

[Slide 7: CES 2021]

2021.

[Slide 8: CES 2023]

And finally, 2023. The black bit at the left has taken over.

So, we have attendance down, and a decline in evangelical belief and behaviour.

[Slide 9: Jesus God]

But let's be more specific about some beliefs. A recent Angus Reid Institute/Cardus/Canadian Bible Society poll on Christian belief with a sample size of 2,026 conducted between February 20-25 this year, asked for agreement with the statement "Jesus had many roles such as a teacher and prophet, but he was not God."

This chart has evangelicals on the top bar, then mainline Protestants and then Roman Catholics. Dark blue is strongly agree; light blue, somewhat agree; light orange, somewhat disagree; dark orange, strongly disagree; and black, not sure or prefer not to say.

Our evangelical numbers look better than the other two groups, but rather than celebrating let's ask ourselves why a quarter of evangelicals either agree with this statement or don't know. That's one in four people in our churches. This is not a peripheral issue or a denominational distinctive. That Jesus is God is as core as core gets for the Christian faith.

[Slide 10: Resurrection]

Just one more, this slide is from the same study, and uses the same scale. Respondents were asked for their agreement with "The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an historical event that actually occurred in the 1st century." In this case you can see that 1 in 5 evangelicals either disagree with this statement or said they don't know. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:14,17 "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. … And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."

I've been glossing over the mainline and Catholic numbers, but wow. What is going on there?

Measurements themselves doesn't tell us why we're getting these measurements. And we need to understand why, if we're going take steps that will affect the trend lines.

Let me be clear that I have evangelism in view here, and not a move to re-assert a kind of Christian hegemony. We want people to know Jesus, to make him Lord and Saviour, to grow in discipleship and grace. And we want to know why they are currently choosing not to do so.

[Slide 11: Anthropology]

For the rest of today's talk, I want to talk about *anthropology*. That is, who are we as human beings. And I hope by the time that I'm done that you'll see how a change in our self-understanding has shaped a such a time as this.

Big cultural change takes a long time. Now the effects of a change-in-the-works can show up in a short amount of time, and we've seen some of that in the measures that I just showed you; but this started a long time ago.

I'd like to start with Jean-Jacques Rousseau who lived from 1632 to 1704. But I want you to start to hear our own age in his story. Rousseau was French, and he lived in a time where arguably both the government, represented by the king, and the church, in this case, the Roman Catholic Church, was corrupt. They abused their considerable power. And Rousseau was concerned about the abuse of power. And I want you to start to hear our own age here. If you read the news, if you go on social media, you will see story after story of the abuse of power. This is no accident. It is the narrative of our age.

What do you do with the abuse of power? What do you do if the power structures entrench those that are holding power and abusing it? Rousseau decided he would delegitimize the power of the king and of the church

because power need to be legitimate in order to be respected. And Rousseau, and other enlightenment philosophers, did this with a little idea that they described as a “state of nature.”

The idea of a *state of nature* was a thought experiment that went like this: What if we strip away all our social conventions? Strip away religion, government, family. Strip away social convention, strip away what is “normal.” If we take all of that away, what are we really like? Because you see laws, family, allegiances, religion, these were all things that you received from society, from outside of you. And Rousseau wanted us to imagine what we, what society, would be like if all of this wasn’t there.

[Slide 12: State of Nature]

Here is me in a state of nature. This bit of clip art I found is perfect, because this guy is a blank canvas. There is no one around him in whom he can be defined in relation to. No clothes that would mark him out as a butcher, baker or candlestick maker. No baggage, no past, no commitments.

Now, here is, significantly; here is what Rousseau said. He famously said, “**Man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad.**”[1] And time, and technology, and songs like John Lennon’s “Imagine,” have incubated this idea, and, I submit to you, this is why, or an important part of the reason why the church finds itself in such a time as this.

[Slide 13: Lennon]

I mentioned John Lennon’s “Imagine” – listen to some of these Rousseau-ian lyrics. [Leid motif]

> Imagine there's no heaven
> It's easy if you try
> No hell below us
> Above us, only sky

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Paul Moultou, and Pierre-Alexandre Du Peyrou, *Collection Complète Des Oeuvres, Volume 12* (Nabu Press, 2010), 249.

That’s “No religion”

> Imagine there's no countries
> It isn't hard to do
> Nothing to kill or die for
> And no religion, too

That’s no state (and no religion) … did he say, “No religion?”

And then the bridge:

> You may say I'm a dreamer
> But I'm not the only one
> I hope someday you'll join us
> And the world will be as one

And here is Lennon’s version of the beatific vision. The dreamers pool their virtues as people in a state of nature and usher in paradise. I’ve used an older song, but it wouldn’t be hard to find similar sentiments in contemporary lyrics.

Now you may start to hear echoes of this. How many times have you heard someone say that this is natural? And what they meant by that was this is good. They’re thinking healing herbs and pure springs when they talk about nature, not medium sized animals eating small animals and large animals eating medium sized animals. Rousseau put nature and goodness beside each other, and what he meant by “nature” is nature apart from a received order of things. Apart from the laws of the king. Apart from the rules of religion. Apart from the society of our families. Apart from social convention.

Of course, Scripture tells us and Genesis 1:1, that in the beginning, there was God. Not in the beginning there was us in the state of nature. This may seem obvious, but this is very important. Rousseau was changing where our story begins. Instead of beginning with God, he is beginning with us.

And in beginning with us, he is giving us, a blank slate. A blank slate not just remake the world, but to remake who we are.

And very significantly, Rousseau is saying that we, we in a state of nature, are good. Of course, this isn't what the Bible says. The Bible says, in the story of the fall, that we sinned, and that our sins separated us from God, and that there is no one righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). And that without Christ's saving work on the cross appropriated by faith there is no salvation. Rousseau and Scripture are very different on this point. And the question of whether we are fundamentally good is an anthropological question, right? It is a question of who I am. Am I fundamentally good?

So, every system, religious, secular, or otherwise has an idea of what the problem in the world is, and an idea of what is the solution. As Christians, we believe that the problem in the world is sin and death, and that the solution to sin and death comes through Jesus Christ. Now, I want you to notice that the solution, what we call salvation, comes from outside of us. That is significant.

Here is what Rousseau does: He says, "Man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad." So, what is bad comes from outside of us, and then the solution is to get the outside out of me, so that I can recover "who I really am" when no one is forcing me to be something else.

Society makes me bad; religion makes me bad; my parents make me bad; society's expectations make me bad. Why? Because they are all making me into something that is not me, and the true me is good. So to move me from me is for me to become bad. And salvation then becomes finding my true self, or what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls my "authentic self."

[Slide 14: Malaise of Modernity]

The quotes I'm going to use come from a short volume, it's about 100 pages, called *The Malaise of Modernity.* There it is, don't judge a book by

its cover. Its far more exciting than it looks. Taylor is introducing us to the idea of the *authentic self.* I want you to notice that he's talking about Rousseau, and how morality comes from the "voice of nature within us."

[Slide 15: Taylor 1]

> Rousseau frequently presents the issue of morality as that of our following a voice of nature within us. This voice is most often drowned out by the passions induced by our dependence on others, …. Our moral salvation comes from recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves.[2]

I want you to see that Taylor uses the language of salvation here, this is religious language. And salvation, what Taylor calls, "moral salvation," is "recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves."

So, there's something weird going on here. I want us to just stop and appreciate how weird this is. And this is weird in an anthropological way. There are two *mes*. There is the *me* that society has made me to be. Maybe my parents put me up to being like this. Maybe the government made me like this. Maybe the church made me like this. But that me, that is not the real me. The real *me*, the authentic *me*, is who I am inside.

And so, what Taylor is saying is that salvation is me discovering "who I really am." Now, in all of this discussion, if you want to identify when this new anthropology is operative, when it is a play, you just listen for that little phrase "who I really am."

[Slide 16: Rabbit – Who I really am]

My first car was a 1977 Volkswagen Rabbit. This is the 1979 version, but mine was the same colour. I never noticed Rabbits before I had that car. Afterwards I saw every one that drove by. If you pay attention to the phrase "who I really am" like it was a Volkswagen Rabbit, you'll start to understand what is going on in the culture around you better. And you'll likely even hear it on your own lips.

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[2] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ont: Anansi, 2003), 28.

Back to Charles Taylor. Taylor then goes on to say two more things about the authentic self, that we'll see in this quote:

[Slide 16: Taylor 2]

> And then it greatly increases the importance of this self-contact by introducing the principle of originality: each of our voices has something of its own to say. Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within. Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization in which it is usually couched.[3]

Here's the two things, and Taylor is really meditating on Rousseau here, and others, but Rousseau is in there.

[Slide 17: 2 Things – Discovery]

First, no one can help me find my authentic self, my real *me*. I have to discover this alone. Why do I have to discover it alone? Because if you try to help me, you'll just try to shape me into your image. I am vulnerable when I am in a state of not knowing who I am, and if I let you help with that, you will just take advantage of me (abuse your authority) in that moment and shape me into something that is to your advantage. So, I have to discover who I am by myself. And this metaphor of discovery, trying out new things, of finding myself, but in a self-directed way, this is because we fundamentally do not believe that others could come alongside us and help us discover our identity without taking advantage of us. Remember evil is from outside of us.

So, first, no one but <u>me</u> can find my authentic self.

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[3] Taylor, 29.

[Slide 18: 2 Things – Uniqueness]

Second, I will only know I have found my authentic self if what I find is unique, if it is original, if it is different. You might say that my uniqueness is my goodness, and my goodness is my uniqueness.

I will only know I have found my authentic self, if it does not look like anyone else.

Now here is how this affects religious faith. We talk about religion, as if it was a deep part of who we are. And we've gotten caught on this as evangelicals because we use interior language when we talk about faith. We say, "My religious beliefs are deeply held," "My beliefs are deep inside me," "They are a part of me," — and that's where the authentic self is. We say that Jesus lives in my heart. And what could get deeper inside than your heart?

And then we say that everyone has to make the decision about their beliefs for themselves. And what we mean by that is that everyone needs to make a decision for Jesus, and what we mean is that everyone will find the same Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, who walked the Earth, was crucified, died and buried, and has risen from the dead, and will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. That's what we mean.

Here's how that is heard in our culture today. If I look deep down inside my heart, and I see a Jesus there that looks like the Jesus that you see when you look deep down inside your heart, then I have found you. I have not found me. And to the extent that you encouraged me to find this particular Jesus, you have manipulated me, and you have abused the access that you have to me.

If my religious beliefs are a part of who I am, and if who I am is unique, then my religious beliefs also need to be unique. Sociologist Reg Bibby used to talk about "Religion à la carte" as if people just chose things because they wanted to. They took a little bit of this and a little bit of that because they found it helpful, right? My religious beliefs are like a work of

art. No! That's actually not it, or not the important bit. They choose different things to be different; To be different than everyone else because they feel they *have* to. Heterodoxy has become a cultural imperative. I now have to believe something that is different than you or I can't be saved — that is a meaning of our new anthropology of the authentic self.

We hear a lot about identities in our culture. And it is somewhat bewildering to look at the wide array of identities. What are these all about? To a large extent, this is a longing after salvation.

If I am only really me when I am unique, then I have to find a unique identity, in order to know that I have found me.

Society makes me bad. Evil comes from outside of me. Society has influenced me. Society, telling me who I am, has made me bad. Goodness, salvation comes from getting society out of me, getting societies messages about who I am out of me, so that I can dive deep and discover who I really am. And when I find who I really am, I will be unique, and I will be good.

This is salvation as many people in Canada today understand it.

What this means is that when you and I come along and we present the gospel, the deposit of the faith once delivered to the Saints; when we point to a common set of Scriptures in the Bible, and we call people to faith in the one God that we know in Jesus Christ and in the Trinity; when we invite people to share our faith, as part of the one, universal church, this is received as us trying to prevent people from finding their unique authentic self. Let me put this another way. It is received as us denying them access to salvation.

How did we get here? I submit you that we got here because our anthropology changed. Our understanding of who we are changed. Before we chalk this up to Rousseau as a wicked, wicked philosopher, let's remember why Rousseau started his thought experiment all those years ago about what we would be like in a "state of nature." There were people in society, the king, but also the church, that abused power, and Rousseau

was looking for a way to redress this. He did not command soldiers. He did not command, great wealth, so he sowed an idea.

We will not learn how to address this, unless we can at least have some sympathy for why Rousseau — and why our culture — were, and are, looking for something else.

Ironically, Charles Taylor writes that although we try to escape external demands when defining our authentic selves, it leaves us unable to know if what we found is significant:

[Slide 19: Taylor 3]

> … I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.[4]

Taylor goes on to say, "… the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others."[5]

What Taylor means here, is that I can think I've found my authentic self, I can judge that it seems pretty unique, and I can assert that what I've found is good, but if others don't celebrate it, I can't be sure. So, if finding my authentic self is moral salvation, then affirmation of others is assurance of salvation.

This is why when we are non-affirming of people's identities that they react so harshly. To them we are not being disinterested. We are denying them assurance of salvation.

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[4] Taylor, 38.
[5] Taylor, 42.

There are different reasons why Rousseau is suddenly plausible, but, certainly, it has something to do with the perception that powerful people are out to take advantage of me. That no one can be trusted.

[Slide 20: Movies …]

Let me explain this with some examples from popular culture. I'm going to talk about Hollywood movies. There are really only about 10 plots in Hollywood. There are 10 stories, I think of them as 10 sermons that get preached when you're sitting in the reclining chairs, eating popcorn at the Cineplex.

There is the Mel Gibson, I-am-pushed-just-so-far-and-then-I-snap-and-kill-everybody plot. There is the revenge, or vengeance plot (a variation on the Mel Gibson theme). And then there is the amnesia plot where a character forgets who he is. Think of the Ugly Duckling, think of Cinderella, think of the stories where ordinary people in extraordinary situations find out they have superpowers.

[Slide 21: Bourne]

Perhaps my favorite movie of all time is "The Bourne Identity"[6] (My second most favorite movie is Napoleon Dynamite. You can draw your own conclusions about my psychic make up from that.)

The 2002 Bourne Identity movie, for example, was the first in a series where the protagonist, Jason Bourne (whose alter ego and authentic self is David Webb) has suffered induced amnesia at the hands of his handlers in the nefarious Treadstone program. When his Treadstone handlers controlled his identity, he was an assassin. Now, having had an accident that caused a break in his handlers' control, he is on a mission to discover his authentic self.

What is significant here is that sin, in Jason's case his sins are the murders he has committed as an assassin. Keep in mind that Treadstone, his

[6] "The Bourne Identity (2002 Film)," in *Wikipedia*, November 29, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Bourne_Identity_(2002_film)&oldid=1124626813.

handlers, like Rousseau's corrupting society, created an identity for Jason and they put him up to the murders. When we watch this movie, we don't blame Jason for the murders because Treadstone made him do it. He didn't know who he was, so he wasn't responsible.

And here is how he is separated from his sins: He's not separated from his sins because Jesus took them on himself on the Cross. He's separated from his sins by *realizing* that the sinner was not who he really was. In the movie, his real identity is David Webb.

Salvation, then, is not by faith, but by *knowledge*. Theologically speaking this is a kind of Gnosticism, but that's for another talk.

[Slide 22: Once Upon a Time]

Another example: the ABC/Disney television series Once Upon a Time gathers Disney's stable of characters, such as Snow White, Prince Charming and Rumpelstiltskin, into a fairy-tale world where everyone is unique and extraordinarily so. The first episode introduces the "fall" when the witch/evil queen from the Snow White story places a curse on the characters in this fairy-tale world. They are all cursed with amnesia (a condition where they forget who they really are) and are forced to live in an ordinary, American town leading ordinary lives. The plot device that pushes the series forward is the main character's quest to help everyone rediscover their true authentic selves. The identities they've been cursed with are externally imposed and the ordinariness of these identities are an affront to their true or authentic ones.

Do you see Rousseau behind the curtain? Do you hear Taylor describing the authentic self?

[Slide 23: Thor]

Finally, Thor is a character based loosely on Norse mythology, and is a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). In the 2017 movie "Thor Ragnarok," Thor, the protagonist, finds himself in mortal jeopardy in a battle with his sister, the evil goddess, Hela. Thor is saved when, in that perilous

moment, he more fully realizes his true self releasing strength and power he was unaware he had.

Significantly, help did not ride over the hill as might have happened in a Western made several decades earlier. Salvation happened because Thor connected more deeply with his authentic self.

[Slide 24: Disney]

I'll add that this is a very typical theme for Disney, especially for children's entertainment. If you think about the Disney animated films from the last 30 years, you'll see a pattern. It's almost always about the protagonist discovering herself, her authentic self. It's important to underscore this because these movies become the cultural catechism for our kids, driving home the same blunt message, the same anthropology, the same theology, every time we put on a video.

[Slide 25: The Prince of Egypt]

We even fell for this with the 1998 The Prince of Egypt, cartoon movie about the life of Moses. In the movie, Miriam, Moses' sister, when Israel is trapped by the Red Sea with Pharoah's army bearing down, Miriam sings this to Moses:

> There can be miracles
> When you believe
> Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill
> Who knows what miracles you can achieve?
> When you believe, somehow you will
> You will when you believe.

The song says, it was Moses who could achieve miracles. He could achieve miracles if he reached down inside himself, found himself, found the confidence to believe in himself — not in God, in himself — then he would be saved, and Israel would be saved.

And Evangelical churches promoted this movie. And Billy Graham endorsed it. And we missed what it was teaching.

Before we talk about what we should do, let's talk a bit more about how this became plausible.

After all, when you start to describe it the way the television series Once Upon a Time does, or you think about Thor and his electric eyeballs, it all starts to seem a little strange – but it doesn't feel strange, does it? It feels comfortable.

The Reformer John Calvin wrote, "The human heart is a perpetual idol factory."

[Slide 26: Psalm]

Let me put this beside what Psalm 115 and 135 says about idols, it's the same words in both Psalms:

> "Those who make them [make idols] become like them; so do all who trust in them."

This is a statement about anthropology. The psalmist is saying, we become like the idols that we make. Now I'm going to make a possibly controversial shift here and in the place of idols I'm going to put our technology.

And the question is, "Do we become like our technologies?" or "Do our technologies shape how we think about ourselves?" I'm going to argue that they do.

[Slide 27: Machine]

I want you to think of sports, or whenever anyone excels at a high-level. Think of someone who is especially productive. Have you ever heard someone say, "You're like a machine!" Think about that. They mean to pay you a compliment when they say you're like a machine they mean that you're indefatigable, you don't get tired, you're strong, you're relentless.

How many people, when talking about eating, have described it as refueling. We refuel machines, we don't refuel people.

That's one example. But we have had machines for a very long time.

[Slide 28: Digital Creators]

The new technologies are digital technologies. Now this is going back a long way, and it's going to date me, but I remember in university someone else in the dorm had an Apple Lisa (that was a computer, before Apple made a Mac they made a Lisa). And after I finished my exams, I just wanted to zone out and this person had a video game called SimCity, on his Apple Lisa, and he let me play it!!! And I was there for hours before I looked up. And Sim City has something called "God mode" where you could make your world, or your city, you could make it right there in the game. Here I was "playing God."

In our digital lives closer to now, we create profiles for ourselves on social media. I want you to notice the use of the word "create." In God mode, I *created* a world. On social media, I *create* a profile. We use the word "create" as something that is within our scope of things to do, and that it is a natural thing, and we forget that creating worlds, and creating ourselves is something that is, or was, done by God.

Now we've always had people that created works of art. But those artists in the past had to work with materials out of the physical world, and that took a significant amount of effort and skill. They did not create things, *ex nihlio,* out of digital nothing, a digital *ex nihlio*, like we do now. Moreover, in the past artists tended to portray things of the created order, the order that God had made, and in doing so they paid God the sincerest form of flattery which is imitation. They drew and sculpted things God made first. What has changed in recent years, is that anyone can do this. And it is this possibility, this possibility of creating worlds and ourselves; and effortlessly creating and re-creating them, that have changed how we understand ourselves, and what we can be.

To tie this back to Taylor and to the authentic self, have you noticed that in video games, you are often a character on a voyage of discovery, who augments himself and his powers, and improves himself as you go along. These are patterns, these are templates for how we are understanding our identities now. Taylor said, I have to discover who I am, without help, and in video games, those tracks are laid down.

When we have these tools, these technological tools, tools that fundamentally change what we give our attention to, we become like them.

And although we have had digital tools for some time. What has changed in recent decades is the ubiquity of these tools. Everyone has them. We manipulate our worlds with them — Did you see what I just did. I said, “We manipulate our worlds.” — There are worlds, and I am in control of *my* world. And the ability to manipulate worlds, and manipulated identities with very little effort has changed how we think about ourselves. If I can change who I am, why should I not change who I am? This has changed our anthropology.

So why should changing our anthropology change our theology? For this reason — there are others, but certainly this reason: In the beginning of the biblical story, we find an anthropology. God is telling us who we are, and unless you accept what Scripture says about our nature, the rest of the story doesn’t really make sense. We are made in the image of God. We are also fallen. But, if we are not fallen, if the pressing problem that we face is not our sin, then there is no need for the solution that is Christ and the cross.

This is why we need to pay attention to our anthropology. This is also why we need to pay attention to our tools, tools that help shape our anthropology. 50 years ago, our machines made us like machines; now our digital tools, make us like God.

I said “make us like God” very deliberately because this was the original temptation of the serpent in the garden of Eden. That serpent said, But the serpent said to the woman, Gen 3:4-5 “You will not surely die. **5** For God

knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God*, …"

The temptation then was that we would be like God knowing good and evil, not that we would be like God as creators. Knowing good and evil is not in itself a bad thing, nor is making or creating things. What is going on here is that Adam and Eve were tempted to assume the prerogative of God in deciding what was good and bad as we are in deciding what gets created.

I'm going to take a few more minutes on this idea of us as creators because it is so ingrained in our culture now that we will have difficulty understanding why it might be a problem.

If we return to art, you may have seen works of art and thought "They don't look like anything," and for that art that is intentional, that is the point. As I said, earlier, the artist is studiously refusing to pay God the complement of reflecting or imitating something in creation. Rather, he is bringing, or creating something new out of his will, and in saying my art it is good, he is challenging God's own evaluation of his work at creation where God looked at all he had made and said it was "very good."

Who we are is also who we are in relation to God. Right from the beginning in creation God was there, and God ordered what our relationship with him would be like.

The fall in Genesis 3 is about us holding up ourselves as competitors or alternatives to God. In doing this we moved the locus or place of authority in our lives from outside of ourselves to inside of ourselves. The sin of pride is that we could be God.

But there is only one God, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to set myself up as his competitor.

It's not that we should necessarily set aside the technological tools of our culture. I use computers every day. I make charts, I write computer code, I even use AI. Our culture is always going to be pushing against a biblical anthropology, or a biblical idea of salvation. I think we need to make sure

that there is a conversation happening with culture about these fundamental Christian teachings.

More than this. We have to make sure that our own people understand the competition going on here for their hearts and minds, and to equip them to know the biblical stories and why they matter for how they live.

If I can veer for a minute into public policy. The idea that we are our own to make, remake or end is what made euthanasia, what we call Medical Assistance in Dying possible. Only people who believe that their lives can and should be in their hands would contemplate MAiD. The change in anthropology came first. After that doctor-assisted suicide became not just possible, but inevitable.

How did we come to such a time as this? There are many reasons, but our anthropology is certainly a significant part of it. Idea's matter. Rousseau's idea that "**Man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad**" is just now coming into full flower. What will it take to advance the ideas that we are made in the image of God? That our lives are not our own, that we are bought with a price? That our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever? That "we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture"? (Psalm 100:3).

The answer to the question, "Who am I?" can either help you find God, or it can eclipse him.

Tomorrow, we're going to look more at this shift in our locus of authority using the work of Sam Reimer, and then we'll spend some time talking about what we might do.