



Friday Feature for July 1, 2022

Mars Hill Audio

*Ron Highfield on modern assumptions
about personal identity & freedom*

Synopsis:

Ron Highfield, author of *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture* (IVP Academic, 2013), discusses how his book addresses those who doubt Christianity's goodness, especially as regards modern assumptions about identity, freedom, and dignity. He argues that there must be a fundamental altering of worldview presuppositions, and describes Zeus mythology's caricature of God as an unjust and unpredictable tyrant — a being of pure will. Modern assumptions long established in other areas have greatly influenced our understanding of identity and submission to authority. Highfield explains how the Protestant affirmation of ordinary, everyday life can degenerate to sensualism and a denial of the need to rise to moral heights such as those set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. The goodness of Creation means that it can be used for good; but not if it's taken out of order. Highfield concludes that true community cannot be established apart from a conviction of harmony and God's Divine ordering. Freedom and dignity, therefore, must be rooted in love. This interview was originally published in 2013 on Volume 118 of the *Journal*.

Transcript

Ken Myers

This is the Friday Feature for July 1st; I'm Ken Myers.

Volume 154 of the *Journal* — that's the current volume that's out now — features an interview with Carl Trueman about his book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Two of the thinkers that helped shape Trueman's argument are Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. Those two names show up frequently in the footnotes of books written by guests on Mars Hill Audio products. For example, back in 2013, I interviewed theologian Ron Highfield about a book called *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, and he also relied on Taylor and MacIntyre. Highfield is concerned that many people in our time reject the Gospel because the God of the Bible is seen as a threat to human freedom and dignity.

In modern culture, Highfield observes, “we are taught that our self-worth and happiness depend on reconstructing ourselves according to our desires. And the project of redesigning ourselves necessitates that we continually break free from the web of social relationships and expectations that would otherwise impose an alien identity on us.”

Given the modern view of the self, “many of our contemporaries feel little need for divine law to guide their actions, divine grace to empower their freedom or divine love to ground their worth.” Highfield explains in the book’s Preface that, as he wrote the book, he thought especially of addressing young people with Christian upbringing who teeter on the edge of unbelief or indifference.

Ron Highfield

More and more I think the challenge is not so much, *Is Christianity true?* but *Is it good?* And I think this generation is having doubts about that. And this book really addresses that group — from eighteen to thirty-five maybe — because I think that group has been more inundated with the consumer-oriented culture and the aesthetic, the me-centered culture, more than perhaps any generation, although I’m not making that argument. I’m not trying to compare, I’m just saying [in] my experience, this is a[n] incredible challenge, and it’s not going to be met by just traditional apologetics.

KM

By asking whether or not Christianity is *good*, they are presupposing certain things about what it would be to be good, certain things particularly about identity and about freedom and dignity.

RH

Exactly. Exactly. Because the underlying assumption there is that the self, the human being, achieves respect for others, fullness or happiness in life, and a sense of one’s own worth in certain ways that they don’t hear in the traditional presentation of Christianity as a moral code, as obedience and submission to God; those words sound oppressive to them.

KM

Well, they should sound oppressive in light of what they assume about freedom.

RH

That's right.

KM

And really I think what your whole book is demonstrating [is] that people who have absorbed a fully modern understanding of freedom and dignity, a fully modern understanding of the self and of identity, are in drastic need of a total paradigm shift. That we can't just present the gospel, or we can't even present the claims of the New Testament, or the demands of the New Testament, without taking several steps back.

RH

That's exactly right. My way of saying it is that we have to understand the culture better than it understands itself, so that we can then address the *underlying* values, the underlying way of thinking and assumptions about the self, and make those explicit so that people can see them. And in one chapter in the book I try to lay that out in a very explicit way. And I think that when you actually articulate it, people can see that this is not going to work. This is not really who we are. This is not the human condition. Any thoughtful person could see it isn't. But as long as those presuppositions are implicit and underlying, people cannot even get them out to examine them.

KM

And they seem terribly plausible precisely because so many of our institutions reinforce them.

RH

Absolutely. And, as Gillespie points out, some of that plausibility is aided and abetted by certain ways that we've been talking about God since the late Middle Ages.

KM

The “Gillespie” that Ron Highfield referred to is Michael Allen Gillespie; he’s the author of a book called *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Long-time listeners may remember my interview with him back in 1995 about an earlier book that he wrote called *Nililism before Nietzsche*.

In this more recent book, that Highfield alluded to, Gillespie argues that the modern quest for freedom — understood as liberating each individual self from any limits or constrictions — arose from a novel and dubious description of divine will that emerged in the late Middle Ages. In the rise of the philosophical framework known as voluntarism, the freedom of God came to be emphasized to the point of depicting God as being capricious and arbitrary. God’s will became separated from his love and his rationality, and in the voluntarist account, God becomes more like the Zeus depicted in the myth of Prometheus — volatile and temperamental — and so modern man gladly accepts the role of *emulating* Prometheus, the heroic and defiant rebel pitted against a paranoid and tyrannical divinity.

RH

Zeus is thought of as pure will, as arbitrary, unjust omnipotence. And Milton’s Satan, the Satan character in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, also has the same kind of assessment of the God of Creation as Prometheus does of Zeus — that is, God is a self like him, like Satan, but he happens to be more powerful. It just happens to be that way. And at their essence, they’re both wills. One wins, the other loses, and Satan preserves his dignity by maintaining an inner will that stands in defiance of God. I think this is a common attitude.

KM

It’s common, in other words, for many modern people — including many Christians — to perceive God as pure will. And the modern understanding of the *human* self as pure will — a being whose dignity can only be assured when the will is not constrained — emerges from that late medieval voluntarist picture of God. And modern assumptions that God is a *threat* to freedom are nurtured by the vision of the self conveyed in many of our cultural institutions.

RH

The way you think about God is going to determine the way you think about self, and the way you think about self is going to affect or determine the way you think about God — they just can't be separated. And if you think of the self as having freedom from its own internal resources, and freedom is being and doing what you want to do, and you do that by expressing your inner self, then God is going to become a barrier to that because God is external.

But it's more than that, because if I think that the ideal existence, the ideal life, is will expanding itself and dominating itself and enjoying its environment and encompassing its environment, then I'm going to think of God that way —that God is the same expansive kind of will. Except God actually succeeds and I don't. So that creates not only a jealousy but an enmity there.

And so the modern self and this view of God as pure arbitrary will — where omnipotence becomes scary and oppressive and omnipresence becomes an invasion of privacy — those two are coordinated. You can't love God if you think this way about the self.

KM

It is not uncommon to see Christian teachers and preachers who try to re-tool the Gospel in order to make it fit sympathetically with the modern understanding of the self — an understanding which is intuitively plausible to most modern people. By contrast, Ron Highfield argues that encouraging people to embrace a biblical account of God, of Creation, and of Redemption requires a prior repudiation of those conventional assumptions.

The subtitle to Highfield's book is "Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture." And while there are plenty of books that have criticized the self-centered quality of much of our cultural life, many of these studies fail to address how deeply embedded that worship of the self is in our social institutions. Some writers make it seem as if that emphasis on the self is a late-20th-century phenomenon, a product of the radical movement of the 1960s.

But Highfield makes it clear that for centuries, modern assumptions about freedom and dignity — assumptions long established in our political and

economic life — have been a departure from the historic Christian understanding.

RH

Human freedom has always been extolled in the Christian tradition, and rightly so. But this capacity to almost create ourselves and to take over the role of the Creator — and so when you get to Kant, Kant is sort of the watershed, I think, for the way most people today in jurisprudence and international law and others think of dignity. Dignity is *autonomy*, and that's why human beings have dignity, is that they give themselves the law of their own behavior and their own being. And it's intrinsic. And even God has to respect that autonomy.

So autonomy is a kind of understanding of freedom. It's called the freedom of self-determination. It's the idea that I am what I choose: I make my own choices about what to do and to be, and those choices are not determined by any other thing other than myself. Therefore that is a mark of dignity that separates me from all other earthly creatures. And that's where dignity and freedom coincide.

KM

The first half of Highfield's book, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, is a survey of how the “me-centered self” emerged in modern culture. In explaining how we got here, Ron Highfield relies heavily, as I mentioned earlier, on the work Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. Highfield outlines Taylor's analysis of three prominent trajectories of modern life that rendered this new understanding of identity plausible.

RH

Well, he begins in the ancient world, where human identity, and the moral sources by which we live and by which we understand what a human being is and how to live, were external — external in nature, in one's family, in society. And therefore one was not so conscious of being a unique individual, having to create one's own identity. Your identity was given to you. It was outside of you.

But there is a move that he starts way back in Plato, of Plato's criticism of this kind of external — especially in the warrior mentality, where the warrior sees

his identity in his exploits externally. And he moves through Augustine and then finally down to a kind of watershed in Descartes.

And in this movement, there is a shift of thinking from finding moral guidance externally to finding it internally, from finding one's identity and the basis of one's dignity and the basis of your respect for others and any kind of hope for happiness — it somehow or another has to come from *within* the self. And if anyone tries to impose external rules and regulations or even your identity from outside of you, it begins to sound oppressive from modern ears. So there is this move outside to inside, which one could describe as a kind of move toward individualism, where the individual is defined by the individual's own self rather than relations with others. So that is the first move.

KM

And it's not as if that has been fully accomplished. I mean, people still have some sense of identity because they belong to a particular family or a particular ethnic group, or that there's some situatedness in their lives that confers some sense of identity to them. So that's not entirely, entirely lost.

RH

True. Of course it can't be accomplished, but it's a trajectory. I like to think of it this way: if you're in front of a thousand randomly selected people and you're giving a speech, which lines would be the applause line? Would it be "Be yourself"? "Don't let others tell you what to do"? Or would it be "Conform to your family"? "Love your country"?

KM

We now have bumper stickers — and have for decades — "Question authority." And I've wondered what would happen if you put a bumper sticker that said, "Submit to legitimate authority."

RH

[Laughs] You would get your car keyed.

KM

At least — if not investigated by Homeland Security for being some kind of potential terrorist! So, yeah, that's definitely the dominant tendency, that living a good life proceeds from some interior place.

RH

Yes, well, the second historical motif fits right in with that: it's the affirmation of ordinary life. In ancient cultures, ordinary life was necessary but it was depreciated. I mean, you have to do something extraordinary — achieve glory and honor or please the family or please the crowd — in order to be a[n] authentic human being.

In the development in the Western world, Christianity had a big impact on that. Christianity affirmed the created goodness of the body, of marriage, of raising children, of work. And you can see this in early Christianity, of course, and in the Bible. And you can see it especially, I documented, in the Puritans, where the Protestant — especially the Puritan — side criticized the Roman Catholic tradition for seemingly making two orders of Christians, those who have a special obedience to the gospel and those who live ordinary lives, those monks and nuns and priests who dedicate themselves wholly to God. Protestantism tries to erase that distinction and affirm ordinary life.

Well, that begins a trajectory, which goes through the Deists and others, that basically ultimately says ordinary life, the life of work and play, is all you need to think about. You don't need to think about pleasing God or rising to moral heights that we're called to in the gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, for example. Ordinary life is quite enough. And this, of course, can degenerate into just sensualism. And in fact it does.

I want to say a word about Creation because Christianity — and especially you can see this in Genesis 1 — affirms that Creation is *good*. Oftentimes people take that to mean that it's good absolutely or it's good unequivocally or it's good in all circumstances. But the affirmation of goodness means that it can be used for good. There's a good order here, but it's not good if it's taken out of order. And that's what modern sensualism does, or aestheticism, where human beings seek only some stimulation of the body and its capacity for pleasure. But the body, as Paul says, is meant for the Lord.

Back to the third expressive view of the self, you have the move toward Romanticism. It comes to its height in Rousseau and the Romantics that follow Rousseau. They have a quasi-divine view of the inner self. The inner self [is] not only internal, it's not only ordinary life — there's a whole set of potentialities within the self. And these potentialities can't be released from anything outside. They have to be expressed so that one achieves fullness in life, one achieves happiness, by experimenting — writing poetry, try experimenting with various forms of pleasures — in order to either discover or unfold or create the self.

And Taylor, of course, sees this as the kind of epitome of the modern understanding of the self, where no one outside can tell me who I'm supposed to be. I have to discover that through my own experimentation — it ends up being experimentation. So moral rules, any kind of external relationship with God, or some delay of gratification unto ultimate happiness in the future life with God, this is all viewed as detracting from the here and now — and oppressive even.

KM

So with this modern understanding that not just identity, but that moral judgment proceeds from within, is it possible to sustain any idea of the common good in a society ?

RH

Of course we're forced by practical circumstances to come to some sort of agreement with others. But you see, given this understanding of the self, the kind of agreement that you have with others is kind of externally imposed. Basically it says, well, do whatever you want, seek your own happiness, but don't do violence on others. And that rule of *don't do violence on others* doesn't arise from within the self. It's a kind of a rule imposed whereby each self limits the other selves. It's not really a true community.

A true community would have to be that we have something in common so that my good and your good are harmonious. And I don't see how that can be achieved apart from affirming that human beings have a nature and an end that has been given to us by God, and God is the ultimate unity, and God is the one

who unifies. So I don't see how a true human community can be established apart from a conviction that my true self is harmonious with your true self, and my true self is harmonious with God.

KM

That harmony is a central feature in the Christian account of Creation and Redemption, since God's love is a more focal attribute than his will. In the second half of his book, Ron Highfield unpacks the radically counter-cultural idea of the God-centered self, in which freedom and dignity are rooted in love, not in mere choosing or self-assertion. It's a self understood only in light of the person of Jesus, who reveals the shape of human meaning even as he reveals God to us, a God who is fundamentally self-giving.

As Highfield summarizes, far from being a tyrannical threat, "God's power gives life and freedom, God's omnipresence opens a place for us and touches us with infinite love, and God's knowledge of us roots our identity in God's eternal life. Jesus pioneers a new way of being human, enabling us to think of ourselves as God's beloved children whose life task is to embody God's love for the world."

Ron Highfield's book, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture*, was published in 2013 by InterVarsity Press.

Highfield is Professor of Religion at Pepperdine University. My interview with him was originally featured on Volume 118 of the *Journal*. Since our interview in 2013, Highfield has published a few other books, including *The Faithful Creator: Affirming Creation and Providence in an Age of Anxiety*.

That's all for this week. I'm Ken Myers.