Trueman, Carl R. *The Desecration of Man: How the Rejection of God Degrades Our Humanity.* New York: Sentinel, 2026. 256pp.

The ability to translate and synthesize scholarly research into digestible prose that the average church member can appreciate is a rare skill. Even more impressive is scholarly ability complemented by a pastoral concern for the average church member. Cultural commentary is valuable but hard. Contemporary life can be complex and confusing, and it is often not easy to say how a Christian should think about the rapid, seemingly chaotic changes in Western culture over the last century. Carl Trueman has written several books in the last few years that aid the church's understanding of modern life. The theme in each one is a different answer to the question, "What happened to Christian culture?" Specifically, he attempts to explain how contemporary Western society has lost its Christian norms around sexuality, which is perhaps the most visible evidence of a post-Christian ethos.

Trueman's newest book, *The Desecration of Man*, adds a new step to the analysis. The previous books are a kind of intellectual history that excavate the ideological assumptions that escaped the academy into the rest of society. The new book describes the *effects* of this transformation, specifically on modern understanding of human life. The book is thus an essay in theological anthropology. The Christian view is that "human beings are created by God with a given set of dependencies and obligations, limits, and ends. We are rational, dependent, limited, teleological beings" (12). Man is made in the image of God. What happens, then, when this claim is rejected?

The first thing that happens is a loss of meaning and purpose. And quickly thereafter comes a loss of defensible social norms. Trueman frames the discussion with Fredrich Nietzsche's parable of the madman. Nietzsche describes a scene in which a crazy-sounding prophet arrives and announces the death of God. The parable is sometimes taken as evidence of Nietzsche's atheism, but this interpretation misunderstands his point. It is less that God is dead than that the *idea* of God is no longer effective in modern life. The madman is not *causing* the death of God; he is saying that religion no longer has any power over society. The people think they can just continue as normal. But they are wrong. With no God, they now become responsible for everything, not just their obedience and worship to him. They must make for themselves their own moral codes and their own purposes. This is an enormous task, one better suited to divinity. At first it is thrilling. But it becomes unavoidable and oppressive toil. We might more accurately say that the madman is foretelling the effects of practical atheism in the Christian West. Though the effects will come later, they will come, and the costs will be very great.

Trueman reports on the costs about 150 years later. And they have been great. By giving up the theological understanding of human nature, modern society has been forced to find an alternative. Initially this change feels like freedom. Humans no longer feel bound by divine rules or design; they get to choose for themselves. But what Nietzsche saw, and what Trueman documents, is that freedom can become a great burden. We are able to "make our own meaning," but then we also must do so, even if we don't want to. We have to find some other conceptual framework to understand ourselves. We might decide that we are just animals, greater perhaps than others, but not essentially different. We might see ourselves as commodities, like any other marketable good, so that we can buy and sell

ourselves and each other. We might use our technology to try to change our natures, or at least the social expression of our natures, so that others will recognize us for who we are "on the inside."

These alternative human natures are evidence of what Trueman calls "desecration." Here Trueman responds to a different account of modern life that has some currency in Christian circles. The problem in modern life, the claim goes, is that it is "disenchanted." Everything is "scientific," measurable, engineered, mechanical, and bureaucratic. The solution is to find elements of human existence that resist this tendency, such as art or spirituality. Trueman maintains that the disenchantment thesis is fine, so far as it goes, but that it does not go far enough (20). The real problem is that the sacred nature of human life no longer matters. When we no longer understand mankind with reference to God's purpose and work, we not only misunderstand human beings, but we also attack human nature itself.

This destructive tendency manifests in some specific contemporary contexts. In human sexuality, first the culture tears down the cultural boundaries around sexual activity and thus removes purpose and meaning from it. Sexuality is just personal expression, rather than participation in the ongoing life of the human family. Second, contemporary technology removes the natural consequences of ungoverned sexual activity. Ironically, contemporary culture says both that sexual feelings are the most important feelings and that sex is nothing more than the feelings. Contemporary technology permits intentionally separating sexuality and procreation, which in turn makes childbearing an achievement and children a commodity. Childbearing becomes "mechanized" in the sense that it is an engineered procedure aimed at a defined outcome. But as with other manufactured goods, the mechanical process affects the significance of the action. Reproductive technologies can seem praiseworthy in isolation, but when they become commonplace, they don't mean the same thing. Ordinary human procreation is special in part because it cannot be controlled. Making it into an engineered procedure changes its role in structuring human relationships by making it a form of self-expression with no necessary link to procreation.

The other end of life gets confused too. On the one hand, death remains a fearful enemy. But on the other hand, when life has little meaning, there is less reason to avoid death. The sixth chapter of the book discusses modern confusion about death, but in several respects it is the weakest in the book. There are some great one-line comments, but overall the treatment seems insufficiently Christian. Though there are allusions to Christian teaching, there is no discussion of the Resurrection. Trueman disagrees with Sir Roger Scruton about the way in which death structures life. But it isn't clear that Trueman has understood Scruton's point. Scruton argues that an activity must come to an end in order to be what it is. Thus death is part of what gives meaning to a life, by bringing its activities to a terminus, even if not a completion. Scruton doesn't need to say that death is *good*; he needs only to say that activities without endings are *different*. This observation should have Christian resonance, for it would help explain how life in the new creation could be different. Activities there will not be forced to end and thus may take on a new character.

Chapter 7 is the strength of the book. Three aspects of Christian worship—creed, cult, and code—resist the desecration of man by uniting the three final ends—the true, the beautiful, and the good. Together, the three practices, and their corresponding goods, structure a human life and mutually support each other as means of restoring the sacredness of mankind. If the basic problem in late

modernity is that the image of God no longer informs human self-understanding, then the Christian religion restores that understanding by constantly rehearsing its truth and significance.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is not Trueman's best. It often feels like several shorter articles that have been forced together, with some excellent citations of influential thinkers to sustain interest and momentum. It can be repetitive and shallow in its analysis. Someone who has read his earlier books will find little original thought here, particularly before the final chapter.

Perhaps most damagingly, the "desecration" thesis seems to never really be defended. Early in the book Trueman says that "[desecration] implies the intentional abuse or destruction of something holy, something of more than ordinary significance" (14). Unfortunately, this definition is not very illuminating (if it is even a definition). It requires a further definition of "holy" (and perhaps also of "ordinary"). Yet "holy" cannot just mean "that which ought not be destroyed or abused." To use it to define desecration risks a vicious circle. The argument seems to be that *something* is special about humans—call it "the image of God"—but what this specialness consists in, and why it matters, is less clear. Though Trueman attempts to say *how* desecration happens, he says much less about *what it is*.

Indeed, one might wonder if in certain respects the problem in modern life is not that humans have lost their sacredness but that they have made too much of it. Human beings worship themselves rather than God. Society will have something sacred—if not God, then something inferior. Thus, to say that the problem in modern life is the desecration of man may misdiagnose the problem. For example, it is true that modern life has badly misunderstood the significance of sex. But it would also be incorrect to say that Christianity regards sex as sacred in the sense of being *holy*. Sex is *good* and special in certain respects. It is a gift from God that contributes to the ends for which he made mankind. But in a sense, sex is very secular—so secular that marriage will not persist into the new creation. Thus, the opposite of sacred cannot be "secular." To say that it is the opposite of "profane" is just to restate the claim.

It is telling, perhaps, that Trueman's title is most directly stated in a block quotation around halfway through the book. The quotation refers to "artfully desecrating the sacred," and it appears in a quoted defense of drag-queen story hour (93). Though the quotation clearly illustrates the deep perversity of modern sexual politics, it is curious that it is taken to be a good explanation. A theorist of drag is not obviously well-suited to understand accurately the nature of the sacred. Indeed, as Trueman points out elsewhere, emphasizing the transgressiveness is part of the goal, and thus it is in the interest of the transgressors to overstate the sacredness so as to amplify the transgression. The actual effect is a caricature that is neither funny nor subtle.

It is clear that modern society is valorizing rejections of human physicality. Nietzsche was prescient in this aspect at least. Indeed, Trueman could have added examples, such as the prominent ways in which people abuse their own body through neglect or obsession with appearance, the attempts to live indefinitely through increasingly arcane medical therapies, the stated ambition among some technologists to hybridize or replace humans with computers, and so on. The moral judgments in the book are on target. The final chapter's emphasis on the ways in which the Christian gospel critiques the foolishness of the world is excellent. But the overall effect is somewhat less than the sum of its

parts. Christians who need somewhere to start may find this book helpful, but it should be a gateway to deeper study rather than a final word on the topic.

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