A pithy collection of the best of Carl Trueman’s articles on culture and the church. A compelling, challenging, and sometimes uproarious look at how the world and the church intersect.

Like Luther before him, Trueman understands the power of humor because he understands the absurdity of human self-regard in the context of the fallen world. And like Luther, Trueman shows no mercy, either to his enemies or to himself. His writings are an oasis of welcome wit in what can so often seem like a desert of Protestant pomposity.

“Carl Trueman is at his brilliant, provocative, hysterical best. Reading Trueman is always enlightening and always an event. . . . These chapters will edify, entertain, and occasionally infuriate. What more could one ask for in a book?”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

“Though he might not take himself too seriously, Carl Trueman takes the gospel very seriously in this wonderful little book. Trueman offers laugh-out-loud, insightful commentary on theology, culture, the church, and the Christian life. His rapier wit cuts through absurdity and bad theology like a hot knife through butter.”

J. V. Fesko, Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

CARL R. TRUeman is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.
In this collection of essays, Carl Trueman is at his brilliant, provocative, hysterical best. Reading Trueman is always enlightening and always an event. I loved the previous collections of his articles and enjoyed this one just as much. These chapters will edify, entertain, and occasionally infuriate. What more could one ask for in a book?

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—J. V. Fesko, Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

The essay used to be a key subgenre of Christian writing (witness those of the Baptist John Foster or the Catholic G. K. Chesterton), but in recent days the art of the essayist has become something of a lost art among evangelicals. As this scintillating collection of mini-essays clearly reveals, however, past essayists like Foster and Chesterton have a worthy successor in Trueman. His essays are not always easy to read—not so much because of the difficulty of their content but due to their distinct prophetic edge. Like the essays of Foster and Chesterton, however, although Tureman’s essays do not always soothe, they do ultimately edify.

—Michael A. G. Haykin, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville
Wit and wisdom don’t always go together with theologians, especially with historical theologians. When they do, it’s a real treat. Proving the adage that those who don’t understand history are doomed to repeat it, Carl Trueman brings the treasures of the past to bear on the challenges and opportunities of the present. Even if you don’t agree with everything he says, you can’t help but be provoked to ponder God, yourself, the church, and our culture in fresh ways.

—Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology, Westminster Seminary California

The Reverend Rodney Trotter is an international treasure, and his current residence in Cricklewood belies his ambition to address theological concerns on a global scale. The man seems fearless, offending sacred cows of all sizes and types. His writings shake the very foundations of conservative theological empires. I fully expect him to be named as Time magazine’s “Most Influential Theologian” any day now.

—Derek W. H. Thomas, Minister of Preaching and Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Distinguished Visiting Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi
Fools Rush In
Where Monkeys Fear to Tread
Taking Aim at Everyone

Carl Trueman
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SOME WEEKS AGO a friend forwarded me a link to the blog of an American Christian academic. Now, at the risk of protesting too much, I must stress that I don’t read blogs—I really don’t read blogs—unless, that is, they are sent to me by someone else. Sufficient to my own life is the tedium and banality contained therein; I really have no interest in compounding such with the tedium and banality contained in the lives of other people.

This blog, however, caught my eye, not so much for the specific post to which I had been referred, but because, as I glanced in boredom at the various other posts this person had archived, I noted that part of the stock-in-trade of this particular chap was criticism of Reformed evangelicals as smug and arrogant. This did not bother me, nor did the lack of imagination: hitting the Reformed in such a way in today’s Emergent circles is a bit like calling Obama a “Marxist” in a speech to a branch meeting of the
John Birch Society—you may not actually know what you are talking about, but the crowd will love it, and you certainly won’t have to buy your own drinks at the bar afterward.

What amused me was not the obvious playing to the gallery; no, what was so funny was the self-description in the little bar off to the side, where I was assured that the gent concerned was “a widely-recognized authority” in his own field, a “witty speaker,” and a figure of some importance, with appearances everywhere from national radio and TV to local churches. The irony was clearly lost on the author—railing against Reformed smugness on one half of the web page, while describing himself as a very witty and important person on the other; but, hey, sensitivity to the ironic is generally not a strong point of the Earnest But “Witty” Progressive Brigade.

Now, it is one thing to have others write commendations of you for a book cover or conference brochure—perhaps necessary evils in the cut-throat world of publishing and conferences; and nobody should believe them, least of all the objects of such patent flannel; but to say it about yourself implies that you might actually believe the propaganda, that maybe you yourself are just a wee bit arrogant and smug. And, remember, this chap wasn’t even Reformed. I shudder to think how much worse he might be if he endorsed the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity. One can only assume that the kind of man who describes himself on his own website as “witty” is likely to be the same kind of man who laughs at his own jokes and, quite probably, applauds himself at the end of his own speeches—behavior that was previously the exclusive preserve of politicians, Hollywood stars, and chimpanzees.

Yet this example is just one more piece of Christian absurdity in this topsy-turvy world where anything is now possible. What
next, I wonder? Will black become white? Will the pope cease to be Catholic? Will woodland bears start to use public conveniences? And will Dutch people start listing Belgium as their first choice destination for holidays? Indeed, on the same day I received the above link, I was directed by another friend to a website where an individual had put up on a social network page a public announcement that he was “humbled” by a reference to himself or herself on a well-known theologian’s blog. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought: being humbled usually involves becoming more self-effacing, making oneself more invisible, bringing less attention to oneself. At least, that’s what the Oxford Dictionary implies; but, hey-ho, maybe Webster’s is different?

This person had no doubt asked himself how he might best demonstrate this self-effacement. “Perhaps I should send a private note of thanks to the person concerned, expressing quiet appreciation for his kind reference to me,” he no doubt reflected; but then, suddenly, a light bulb must have clicked on in his head—“No. I know what I’ll do. I’ll announce my humility on my Facebook page! Surely it is hard to imagine a more humble and less attention-seeking move? And, yes, while I’m logged on, I’ll also mention it on the very web page where said well-known theologian originally puffed me, just to make sure that everybody knows how humbled I truly am.”

Don’t laugh—this really happened, and, what’s more, the absurdity of the story does not end there. The well-known theologian’s website to which our humble friend had taken us also contained a link to another person’s site, this time to a recorded interview with—guess who?—the well-known theologian himself! The subject? The importance of the books written by himself! ’Tis true—for you could not possibly make this stuff up.
But the sordid tales of the inverted morality of the Christian web are seemingly limitless. The self-absorption on display here called to my mind yet another web page I am sometimes directed to visit by friends, where the only subject ever discussed seems to be the author’s own contribution to Christian thought, and, very occasionally, the critical interaction of others with his earth-shattering insights (none of his critics understand him and are generally idiots or wicked or both). As one colleague describes said page: see me here, hear me there, stroke my ego everywhere. Indeed, this page always brings to my mind the tale of the apocryphal Cambridge don who used to warble on and on about himself in tutorials until one day, in a moment of humility, he turned to his hapless students and declared, “Well, that’s enough about me; let’s talk about you for a change. What do you think of my books?” But then the owner of this website is a “leading scholar,” a claim that must be true because he himself tells us so on his very own web page; and he should know because he is, after all, a “leading scholar.” And you thought the noise at a chimpanzee’s tea party could be deafening.

Let’s stop there a minute. This is madness. Is this where we have come with our Christian use of the web? Men who make careers in part out of bashing the complacency and arrogance of those with whose theology they disagree, yet who applaud themselves on blogs and twitters they have built solely for their own deification? Young men who are so humbled by flattering references that they just have to spread the word of their contribution all over the web like some dodgy rash they picked up in the tropics? And established writers who are so insecure that they feel the need to direct others to places where they are puffed and pushed as the next big thing? I repeat: this is madness, stark staring, conceited,
smug, self-glorifying madness of the most pike-staffingly obvious and shameful variety.

But yet there is more. There is another phenomenon on web pages that seems closely akin to these direct puffs of one’s own greatness; and that is greatness by proxy. Sufferers of this syndrome develop the uncontrollable habit of continually using the language of intimate friendship about everybody who is perceived to be anybody, thereby making themselves seem to be close to the movers and shakers of the theological world. In such conversations and on such blogs, contacts of only recent and superficial vintage are referenced familiarly as “Dave” or “Geoff” or “my mate, Kev.” With such people, every passing acquaintance is an intellectual intimate; and names casually picked up at lunch, by nightfall are intentionally dropped on personal blog sites, as every pushy arriviste and aspiring parvenu strains to project an image of inner-circle savvy to their needy blog followers.

This is truly a land beyond satire. It is the very antithesis of the attitude of an agnostic lady I knew in the nineteen-eighties who, when asked where her son went to university, would always reply, “Oh, to a small college in East Anglia,” because she feared that the more precise explanation—the University of Cambridge—would bring too much attention to her family and be seen as a way of puffing up herself and belittling others. She was truly modest and fiercely private. Such a different attitude to the “me first and only” exhibitionism found on the web—the Christian web!—today. As I said, book blurbs are one thing; but here we have a world where we have not just eliminated the middle man by producing the phenomenon of the self-blurber; we have then taken it one stage further—we have eliminated the need for the very book whose existence was, traditionally, the necessary precondition of such a
blurb. All that is left is the Onanistic self-aggrandizement of those who proclaim themselves “humble” and “witty,” and “leading scholars.” Sheer virtual Onanism. No wonder their eyesight is so bad they seem blind to their problem.

Now, none of us should be arrogant and complacent about this. I am always mindful of the great line from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, when T. E. Lawrence refers to his own ambivalence to public acclaim: “There was a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known.” Lawrence clearly struggled with fame; and even more so with the fear that his enjoyment of fame might become known; but let’s remember how high the bar was set for him. He had, after all, led the Arab Revolt and was one of the few people who could be justifiably described as a living legend; his work, military and literary, was truly monumental; he hadn’t just launched a blog page where he could talk about “my old buddy, Big Winnie” and “my beers with Gertrude,” and post pics with captions such as “Here’s one of me in Damascus with Faisal and the lads.”

If Lawrence had real grounds for his struggle because he had really achieved significance, the same is surely not true for any of us. We mediocrities struggle at a different level, hoping that our own petty contributions, irrelevant and ephemeral as they are, will be puffed up and acknowledged by others; and, in a sense, there is nothing we can do about that. I am a man divided against myself; I want to be the center of attention because I am a fallen human being; I want others to know that I am the special one; and as long as the new me and the old me are bound together in a single, somatic unity, I will forever be at war with myself. What I can do, however, is have the decency to be ashamed of my drive to self-promotion and my craving for attention and for flattery.
and not indulge it as if it were actually a virtue or a true guide to my real merit. I am not humble, so I should not pretend to be so but rather confess it in private, seeking forgiveness and sanctification. And, negatively, I must avoid doing certain things. I must not proudly announce my humility on the Internet so that all can gasp in wonder at my self-effacement. I must make sure I never refer to myself as a scholar. I must not tell people how wonderful I am. I must resist the temptation to laugh at my own jokes. I must not applaud my own speeches. I must deny myself the pleasure of posting other people’s overblown flattery of me on my own website, let alone writing such about myself. I must never make myself big by clinging to the coattails of another. In short, I must never take myself too seriously. Not even chimpanzees do that.

Some weeks back I noted a leading Emergent web page that spends its time telling the reader how important and radical (in the Starbucks latte drinking sense of the word) the particular person who writes on it is. I raised the question of how, in the marketplace of ideas, Christians can promote the good and the true without promoting themselves. In this context, I’m struck by the following comment from good old P. T. Forsyth, scarcely a conservative evangelical but a whole lot wiser than the Emergent person on said website, and any who are tempted to think too highly of themselves, whatever their theological conviction: “The work of the ministry labors under one heavy disadvantage when we regard it as a profession and compare it with other professions. In these, experience brings facility, a sense of mastery in the subject, self-satisfaction, self-confidence; but in our subject the more we pursue it, the more we enter into it, so much the
more are we cast down with the overwhelming sense, not only of our insufficiency, but of our unworthiness. Of course, in the technique of our work we acquire a certain ease. We learn to speak more or less freely and aptly. We learn the knack of handling a text, of conducting church work, or dealing with men, and the like. If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the gospel. We have to lift up Christ—a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence—a humiliating, even a crushing Christ; and we are not always alive to our uplifting and resurrection in Him. We have to handle a gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it. There is no real intimacy with the gospel that does not mean a new sense of God’s holiness, and it may be long before we realize that the same holiness that condemns is that which saves. There is no new insight into the cross that does not bring, whatever else come with it, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips. If our very repentance is to be repented of, and we should be forgiven much in our very prayers, how shall we be proud, or even pleased, with what we may think a success in our preaching? So that we are not surprised that some preachers, after what the public calls a most brilliant and impressive discourse, retire . . . to humble themselves before God, to ask forgiveness for the poor message, and to call themselves most unprofitable servants—yea, even when they knew themselves that they had “done well.” The more we grasp our gospel the more it abashes us.¹

If PTF is on target, then the kind of self-promotion in which evangelicals, emergent, Reformed, whatever, routinely indulge speaks volumes about our grasp of the holiness of God, the truly radical nature of the gospel, and the stupidity of any attitude on our part other than humility. Web page self-promotionists beware!

THE GREAT DANISH theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, is probably best known in Christian circles for his haunting reflections on God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. While I am guessing many of us would question the theology that underlies some of Kierkegaard’s exegesis of the passage, I think there are few Christian writers or preachers who have so ably captured the terror and confusion that must have filled Abraham’s mind as he made the lonely journey to the place of sacrifice.

Kierkegaard is not easy to read at the best of times; some of his longer works are, to put it very bluntly, surely among the most tedious masterpieces ever penned. Who, I wonder, except for the most infatuated fan, has ever plowed through all of the stages on life’s way recounted in the book of the same name (Stages on Life’s Way)? Further, his appropriation by later existentialist philosophy has had the twofold effect of making him a rather suspect character
among the ranks of the orthodox, an irrelevance to philosophers trained in Anglo-American circles, and a quaint figure of yester-year to the vanguard of the latest continental philosophical ideas. Indeed, I remember as a young Christian finding his journals particularly interesting, and then reading Francis Schaeffer and realizing that SK should really be placed in the “debit” column; I was thus one of those whom James Barr characterized as not having to think because Schaeffer had done my thinking for me.

Yet, over the years, I have returned to SK again and again, and not just because I found a compulsive need to think for myself and to resist letting Schaeffer—or any of the other evangelical gurus—do it for me. Partly the pleasure of reading SK arises from the fact that his one-liners are virtually without peer. Indeed, if you are as bone-idle as I am, you have to love any man who can come up with a statement such as “Far from idleness being the root of all evil, it is rather the only true good” (Either/Or). And I even possess a mug with the inscription, “The truth shall set ye free; but first it shall make ye miserable.” If ever there was a sentiment of which a Northern European, living in the oversized Disney World that is the U.S.A., needed to keep reminding himself, it is surely that one. Indeed, among the few pleasures left to me now that my children are teenagers and regard me with withering disdain, and being a pessimist trapped in a nation of chirpy optimists, is in the bleak landscapes of SK’s essays and the films of Ingmar Bergman. I need my misery.

But there are other reasons for reading SK, perhaps most of all his unnerving ability to nail aspects of society that have actually become more significant since his death rather than less. Here, it is some of his shorter, lesser-known essays that contain some of his most brilliant and penetrating insights. One of them in
particular, *The Crowd Is Untruth*, is both profound and prophetic. In it, he captures brilliantly both the power of the anonymity of the crowd, where personal responsibility, accountability, and identity are surrendered to the larger group. He pinpoints that which became all too tragically true in the subsequent century, the ease with which a talented person can manipulate a crowd into doing the most terrible things. Crowds can make otherwise perfectly sane people do otherwise inexplicable things: run down the road with traffic cones on their heads, applaud at the end of Justin Bieber concerts, and as we now know, herd others into gas chambers and onto killing fields.

Demagoguery is, of course, the bane of politics; but it is also much to be feared in the church. I have often mentioned my dislike of the American evangelical tendency to exalt the great conference speaker and to allow him to do the thinking; such is surely the kind of secularization that Paul fears has invaded the church in Corinth, where crowd-pleasing aesthetics trump critical thinking. The danger in the church, therefore, is not that perfectly ordinary and decent people will construct gas chambers and usher their neighbors off to them; rather, it is the surrender of their God-given intellects to those who use the clichés, the idioms, and the buzzwords of the wider culture to herd them along a path that the leader chooses. Fear of the leader, fear of the pack, fear of not belonging, can make people do strange things.

Even more significant for Christians today, I suspect, are the peddlers of authenticity that now swarm around the web. They are easy enough to spot: the slightly out-of-focus web page photo, with eyes averted from the camera, serious, pensive expression, soul patch, glasses in a style first sported in the seventies by existentialist...
Swedish hairdressers called Sven, perhaps torn jeans, autumnal lighting, maybe a few leaves scattered on the ground. And, above all, constant, grating references to “authenticity.” Given the clichéd manner in which it is relentlessly expressed, such “authenticity” is, it seems, a somewhat synthetic product: whatever individuality the blogmeister might otherwise possess is often simply obliterated by the mass-produced idiomatic pseudo-cool of the cutting-edge crowd through which “authenticity” is expressed. It’s a crowd-pleasing product that, surprise surprise, too often merely reflects the predilections of the crowd. Of course, not a few of these kinds of authentocrats quote Kierkegaard. A supreme ironist himself, SK would no doubt have appreciated the irony of Kierkegaard chic in the crowd of untruth and the fact that claims to authenticity are always in this present age sure signs that one is dealing with a phony. And yes, before anyone shouts “Physician, heal thyself!” he would probably also have been amused, in a horrified sort of way, by the irony of appearing on a mug, a commodity for the mass consumer market.

Of course, the peddlers of mass-produced authenticity are soft targets, as easy to spot as their navelocentric web musings and pictures are easy to mock. But the crowd mentality also poses a problem for the Protestant Christian without the soul patch, Sven glasses, and camera with blurred vision. The Reformed world has its dark suits, its hall of fame, and its clichéd patois of pieties as well. We may talk about truth rather than authenticity—and rightly so—but when belief in that truth becomes merely a function of being part of the crowd, then we too have failed to be truthful individuals.

There is a real tension here. Our faith demands only one mediator, and we as individuals are to put our trust in him; but
we are also part of a corporate, communal entity; this communal dimension of Christianity finds expression in a common authority, that of the Bible, and a common language—that of the creeds, of the confessions, and indeed of our own distinctive traditions, by which we communicate with each other and by which we express our corporate identity. Thus we are caught always between the need to trust directly in Christ as individuals, while giving due weight to our identity as part of the larger body. The question to ask is: Is this a tension we live with as we should, or is it one that is too often resolved on one side or the other? Given the current reaction in Christian circles against individualism variously defined, and a renewed emphasis on community, it is worth asking whether the tension is not in danger of resolution in favor of the corporate and at the expense of the individual.

Take, for example, our faith. How much do we truly believe for ourselves and how much do we believe because some great figure, some leader in our chosen community, believes? Or because we just happen to belong to a church where everybody believes the same? In the American world of celebrity cults and megachurches, even in the Reformed world, this is an acutely pointed and relevant question. Indeed, one does not have to be in a megachurch to see the temptation to sit back and just belong through the formalities of public worship and the vicarious belief of the church as body. But if you take a man and put him on a desert island, or in a place where nobody believes the same things, what will happen to his faith? Will it survive? Was it more than a mere public performance or a function of belonging to a particular community? Stripped of its context, it will stand naked, and appear as it really is. To put it in a way of which Luther would have approved, only the one who has
truly come to the point of despair in himself as an individual can then truly come to faith in the savior; for he cannot have another to believe on his behalf; the truth he sees is not something “out there” or reported to him by another; it necessarily involves his very being and identity. One must first believe as an individual before one can belong to the community.

This is the problem of American Christendom. Now, all of the palaver about the “end of Christendom” should not fool us into thinking that a form of Christendom does not still exist. Anywhere that Christianity has become a formality, there is Christendom; anywhere that the belief of the group substitutes for the belief of the individual, there is Christendom; anywhere the rules of the outward game can be learned, executed with panache, and substituted for the attitude of the heart, there is Christendom. And, lest we forget, the form of that formality can be orthodoxy, just as easily as it can be heterodoxy; it can be rooted in the Westminster Standards just as easily as in the tweets of the latest aspiring authentocrat; it can be found in traditional worship styles as much as in the spontaneity of the new. And, ironically, American individualism feeds directly into this negation of the individual: the individual as consumer, as dilettante, thrives in a world of large, anonymous churches, churches that happily continue week by week with only 10 percent of the people engaged in giving of time and money; there are no demands made on the 90 percent of individuals who make up the corporate entity precisely because the body is essentially self-perpetuating. The crowd is truly untruth at that point.

This tension in orthodox Christianity, between being necessarily part of a whole and an individual accountable to God, is something with which all Christians must wrestle. To resolve it
THE CROWD IS UNTRUTH

one way or the other would be to lose something crucial, for the Christian faith demands we reject both solipsistic piety and also any notion of the crowd as our mediator. The one cuts us off from the body; the other makes us mere passengers who never engage God for ourselves.

There are no easy answers to this; that’s what makes it such an interesting and irresolvable tension. But, as it stands, the church in America seems to have the worst of both worlds: an individualism that does not lead to true individual existence as a Christian, one where I truly take responsibility for myself before God, but one where I allow others to do it for me; and that therefore plunges inexorably toward the anonymity of the mega-church and the laziness of the pew-sitting Sunday passenger.

It is not simply the crowd that is untruth at that point. It is the church as well.

One of the amazing things about modern American culture is surely the pathological fear of wasting time. It is especially evident in the attitude toward children. Public school kids have their lives scheduled from morning till night; homeschool parents seem to regard any second of the day from the age of two that isn’t used to learn Latin poetry or the cello or conversational Swahili as time that is wasted. It’s a far cry from my childhood, when school ran from 9 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon, and then I was free to ride my bike, walk on the common, or just sit around with friends. And it continues into later life: all the technology we have, and people seem to have less free time than ever.
Indeed, we have surely lost the virtue that is laziness. As Kierkegaard once said, “Far from idleness being the root of all evil, it is rather the only true good”—a truly amazing theological insight. Some may think that may be going a bit far, but compared with the idea that the essence of humanity is busy-ness, it is much to be preferred.

The greatest testament to the power of wasted time in the history of the church is surely Luther’s Table Talk. A collection of anecdotes and sayings collected by Luther’s closest friends, it reflects the full range of Luther as pastor, mentor, Christian, and friend. Reading the comments, from advice to young preachers (“The sixth mark of a good preacher is knowing when to stop”) to comments on lawyers (“One only studies something as dirty as law in order to make money”) to general observations on life, some of which don’t bear repeating on a polite blog such as this. I suspect Luther’s table companions learned more about life and ministry while drinking beer and having a laugh with the Meister than in the university lecture hall.

Numerous applications come to mind: seminary is the people with whom you strike up friendships (a point that must be taken into account as seminaries move toward more distance education); friendships (real, embodied friendships that are not exclusively mediated through pixels) are crucial to staying the course of ministry—laughter in the face of adversity and hardship not only being vital in this regard but also, of course, an almost exclusively social phenomenon that requires company; drinking beer with friends is perhaps the most underestimated of all Reformation insights and essential to ongoing reform; and wasting time with a choice friend or two on a regular basis might be the best investment of time you ever make.