

The Trees: Individual or Collective

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The Trees

The Tree of Life represents the connection between God and humanity. When you choose to yield to God's definition of what is good and what is bad, you are choosing to live in the Tree of Life. However, when we choose to depend on our own strengths and ideas, we are choosing to live out of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil (aka... the DIY Tree). Where we place our trust (either in God or in ourselves) becomes our subconscious motivation for the actions we take in life. What 'truth' do we live our lives around, my truth or God's truth?

Collectivism and Individualism

Collectivism and individualism primarily describe the way people identify and think about themselves and the way they interact with the world around them. This way of thinking is usually learned from the culture that you grow up in. Members of an individualist culture think of their identity as being comprised of their individual attributes, personality traits, and what they have personally achieved in life. Members of a collectivist culture define who they are in relation to others. They are defined by the things they share with others, things such as shared blood, shared interests, shared history, shared land, and shared loyalty. Individualists see "my story" as being the central narrative while collectivists see "our story" as being the central narrative.

The United States and Western society as a whole are considered individualistic cultures. However, the cultures represented in the Bible were collectivist. Without understanding this cultural mindset it can be very difficult for us to understand some parts of the Biblical narrative.

The Early Church

The early churches were made up of people that were part of a collectivist society. When Paul wrote letters to the churches, he was not speaking to any individual but to the entire congregation. He is writing to people that have spent their entire lives identifying themselves as part of a specific people group. The only way they knew to identify themselves was based on the family they were born into, the culture they were a part of, and the religion their society practiced. There was no talk of 'being your own person' or stepping outside of what was expected of you. From birth, you were identified by your tribe and family. To decide to become someone else or to join a different tribe would make you an outcast of your society. Your loyalty to your people meant division from others that were different.

Then came Jesus. He was born into the Jewish culture but he was different. He talked to Gentiles (any non-Jewish person). He ate with them. He invited them to know His God. This was unheard of. It was scandalous! When we read about this from our individualistic perspective it is easy to miss how outrageous this all was. This was such a difficult concept for people to grasp that Paul and the other apostles spent a ton of time trying to figure out how to convince believers that it was true and could work.

Letters to the Church

Paul mentions several times in his letters that he felt called to be the apostle to the Gentiles Christians aka the non-Jewish converts. He explains to the church in Ephesus what Jesus revealed to him (Ephesians 2:11-22). Then in the next chapter, he puts the exclamation point on the whole argument by telling them his insight into the mystery of Christ. "This

mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6).

Paul is basically saying that following Jesus means putting aside your old family, cultural, and religious identity to become a part of a new family, the family of God. This is what Jesus was talking about back in John 3 when he said that you must be born again. He is saying that you will become a part of a new family with a new identity and that anyone who believes in him can become adopted into the family and become an heir.

Christianity was the first multicultural and international religion. Before Jesus, your religious beliefs and cultural identity were basically the same thing and you were born into it, you did not choose it. When Paul tells people this, he is saying that they are creating a new nation of people that is not based on location or family identity but on personal faith and choice. For an individualistic culture, this seems obvious but for a collectivist culture, it’s a whole new perspective.

Unity and Diversity

Tribes that had been fighting over land, power, and position for thousands of years and now being asked to forget about the past and move forward in unity. However, they are not being told to let go of everything that makes them unique. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul encourages both unity and diversity in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:2-31).

Our faith in Jesus joins us together in unity but we are each uniquely designed and gifted to operate in our faith. God designed us as individuals to have a personal relationship with Him and to share the Gospel in different ways. But, we are encouraged to use our unique gifts in unity with each other. That is much easier said than done. The idea of functioning as the body

of Christ in unity, while valuing each other's diversity presents different challenges to both collective and individualistic societies. However, Paul gives specific instructions to the church in Rome that are valuable for both perspectives.

In Romans 12, Paul explains that love for God and one another is the only way that the body can function as one. Only when we as individual members of the body of Christ get this right can we function as one to carry out the mission of sharing the truth and hope of the Gospel with the world. We have to learn how to see from both an individual and collective perspective. We need to value both unity and diversity.

Finding Balance

We have to find a balance between having an individualistic or a collectivist perspective. We have to be able to grow in our diverse giftings and personalities within the context of being part of the unified body of Christ. Working to find this balance is where we will find the Tree of Life.

So how do we do this? Coming from a mostly individualistic society, we have to widen our perspective to see past our own individual place in the world. We need to think less about how others affect us and consider how we affect others.

But, you can move too far into a collectivist mindset when it comes to relationships too. The anthropological term for when this happens is 'tribalism.' It's the 'us vs. them' concept. This happens when you lock onto your identity of being a part of a group of similar people to the point where you are incompatible with anyone that does not share the same identity. When this happens in the church, the diversity of the body is sacrificed for the desire for easy unity. When a church is based on the similarities of the people that are a part of it then we end up with

churches that are filled with all ears or all arms. Iron can't sharpen iron if there is no healthy friction between them. ("As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" - Proverbs 27:17)

The Bigger Story

At some point, we need to realize that we don't just need God in 'my story' but we have to locate ourselves in *His* story. When we see ourselves in His story we can understand the mission of the Gospel. It makes us understand the significance of our individual part in the bigger picture. It becomes less about personal salvation and more about inviting others to become a part of God's story.

Simply put, we are better together. We are stronger, more capable, and able to accomplish so much more when we are united as one. We are all a part of something much bigger than ourselves. It is bigger than our family, culture, or society. It is the timeless plan of God for the reconciliation of all of mankind. We have been individually gifted to take part in this collective mission. Only when we work to find a balance between collective unity and individual diversity can we live out of the Tree of Life and take our place in God's timeless story.

Further Study:

- *Misreading Scripture with Individualistic Eyes (Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World)*
 - Authors: E. Randolph Richards and Richard James
 - Amazon Link: <https://a.co/d/94C4oBY>

Discussion Questions:

- In Romans 14, Paul gives examples of ‘non-essential’ issues that were causing division in the church. What are some non-essential issues that we allow to come between us now and how can we move past them?
- Is there anyone or any group of people that you struggle to love?