



*Countercultural Advice for
the Rest of Your Life*

DO NOT BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

KEVIN DEYOUNG

“Kevin DeYoung writes with inspiring clarity and pastoral love as he summons a generation of Christians to courage and nerve. As he puts it, ‘The choice that matters most is actually a lifetime of choices.’ This will be *the* book to give to your graduating high school and college students. But please don’t pigeonhole this book. *Do Not Be True to Yourself* is a brilliant and succinct call to all Christians to reject the spirit of the age in favor of the courageous Christian faith.”

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“Kevin DeYoung’s *Do Not Be True to Yourself* is a helpful antidote to a culture of self-obsession. If we’re learning anything about human nature in the age in which we live, it is that outsized focus on oneself produces disabling anxiety, disorienting ‘identities,’ and dizzying confusion about man’s ultimate end. It turns out, secular man’s chief end of glorifying himself is producing the very opposite of joy. This book shows why and shows a better, godward way forward.”

Andrew T. Walker, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Kevin DeYoung

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Do Not Be True to Yourself: Countercultural Advice for the Rest of Your Life

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*To Ian,
our firstborn and the first to leave for college,
we love you and miss you.*

Contents

Introduction *xi*

- 1 Don't Be True to Yourself *1*
- 2 Choose for Yourselves *9*
- 3 The First Day of the Next Chapter of Your Life *19*
- 4 Two Ways to Live *29*
- 5 Horseshoes, Hand Grenades, and the Kingdom of God *43*

Appendix: Twelve Old(ish) Books to Read When You Are Young *57*

Notes *63*

Scripture Index *65*

Introduction

IN MAY 2022, I had the privilege of giving the commencement address at Geneva College (Beaver Falls, PA). I didn't want to recycle the usual commencement fare: "Follow your dreams! Be all that you can be! Go out and change the world!" Instead, I decided to give the opposite sort of advice, as you'll see when you read the first chapter of this book. A few weeks later, I gave the same basic message at the baccalaureate service for Covenant Day School (the school associated with my church). I then posted the Geneva commencement address online.

To my pleasant surprise, the message seemed to resonate with a lot of people. Besides getting a good following online, I heard from pastors and friends and Christians in various places who appreciated the countercultural sentiment. About a month later, Justin Taylor from Crossway asked if I would consider publishing that talk in a little booklet. The plan for a little booklet then morphed into this little book.

Introduction

Over the years I've preached at a number of baccalaureate services and commencement services. I've also preached targeted sermons to high school or college students just beginning or just ending their studies. I've collected some of those messages here, retaining much of the spoken style so you can "hear" the message as well as read it. If there is a theme that holds the chapters together it is the simple exhortation to serve God faithfully and counterculturally in the next season of your life. Obviously, if you have just finished high school or college or some other milestone as a young adult, these messages will speak to your situation. This book is especially for you. But insofar as the counsel in these pages is biblical, I think Christians (and maybe even non-Christians) of all ages can read the book with profit.

May God help us to live by his Spirit, according to his word, and for his glory—as young people, as middle-agers like me, and every stage of Christian discipleship.

Don't Be True to Yourself

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Anna Quindlen—a writer for the *New York Times*, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and a recipient of prestigious honorary degrees—gave this advice to a group of graduating seniors:

Each of you is as different as your fingertips. Why should you march to any lockstep? Our love of lockstep is our greatest curse, the source of all that bedevils us. It is the source of homophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism, terrorism, bigotry of every variety and hue because it tells us that there is one right way to do things, to look, to behave, to feel, when the only right way is to feel your heart hammering inside you and to listen to what its timpani is saying.¹

That's fairly typical commencement counsel: "Follow your dreams. March to the beat of your own drummer. Be true to yourself."²

I'd like to offer different advice: "Do not follow your dreams. Do not march to the beat of your own drummer. And whatever you do, do *not* be true to yourself."

If you think I'm being a little hyperbolic, you're right. I'll provide some nuance to this advice at the end. But I believe it's important to state the matter provocatively because our world screams at us in thousands of commercials, movies, and songs that the best way to live, the *only authentic* way to live, is for you to be you, for you to live out *your* truth, for you to find your true self and then have the courage to live accordingly.

Deceived by Desires

The Bible, on the other hand, tells us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12). Think of the story of Esau who sold his birthright for a pot of stew. "Let me eat some of that red stew," he said, "for I am exhausted. I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" (Gen. 25:30, 32). Esau was consumed with his desires.

Esau was defined by his desires, and they deceived him. Esau is depicted as an animal. You can see this more clearly

in the original Hebrew. All he can think of is the red stuff, the red stuff (*ha-edom, ha-edom*). He exaggerates the extent of his need. He wasn't literally going to die. (Like kids saying when dinner is a half hour late, "I'm starving!"). Esau is emotional and impulsive. He is fainting, gasping, gulping. You can almost see him wiping off his mouth, throwing down a napkin, and letting out a loud belch as he walks away from his meal of stew. He was not made nobler for satisfying his desires. He was made lower. He became like an animal. That's what the text wants us to see. Esau the skillful hunter was prey to his own appetites. He had a better identity as the firstborn of Isaac, but he gave that away. He became a profane man, treating what was sacred with irreverence and disrespect.

The world tells us that our identity is found in what we desire. So to deny the fulfillment of what you desire is to deny your truest identity. We are all awash in what Carl Trueman calls "expressive individualism."³ The idea is that you are what you feel, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I'm sure you remember Elsa's anthem "Let It Go" from *Frozen*. With its emphasis on testing the limits and breaking through, it's no wonder the song and the character Elsa have become a favorite in the LGBTQ+ community.

No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free.⁴

What could be more indicative of the spirit of the age?

A Philosophy for Our Times

Throughout most of history, philosophers and theologians have distinguished between affections (which are motions of the will) and passions (which sweep over us unbidden). That's why the Westminster Confession says God is without parts and passions. The Westminster divines were using "passion" not as we do to mean intense zeal. They were saying, God does not have an emotional life like we do. He is Pure Act; nothing happens *to* him. He is never rendered passive.

Consequently, the Western tradition, especially in the Christian tradition, has insisted that the lower appetites must be constrained by reason and the grace of God working within us. In fact, the Reformed tradition goes one step further and reminds us that we can be misled by all our faculties. That's what we mean by the phrase "totally depraved"—our passions are broken, our reason is not entirely reliable, and our wills, apart from Christ, are bound to sin.

Most people you will encounter in life—and maybe you, reading this today—operate with an unspoken assumption that

shapes and defines every argument, every instinct, and the way you look at the world and look at yourself. The assumption is this: *is equals ought*. Importantly, the *is* here is no longer about your body. It's not about some physical givenness. "My body tells me something true about myself even when I don't feel that it is true." That mindset is no longer assumed. Now it is assumed that what you feel about yourself, or believe about yourself, or perceive about yourself tells you who you are and how you should behave.

Is equals ought conditions us to believe: "This is what I feel like, so this is what I should do; and if you tell me I can't do that, or that I should be something or someone other than I feel myself to be, you are attacking the very heart of my personhood."

What's wrong with this philosophical assumption? Besides being devoid of any objective, empirical, scientific facts, the assumption is entirely at odds with Christian anthropology. The only way *is equals ought* can work is if there is no doctrine of the fall—if our instincts are never self-deceived, if our desires are never self-centered, and if our dreams are never self-destructive.

The salvation we all know we need is not to be found by looking within ourselves but by looking for grace outside ourselves. G. K. Chesterton said it so well:

That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones. Let Jones

Don't Be True to Yourself

worship the sun or moon, anything rather than the Inner Light; let Jones worship cats or crocodiles, if he can find any in his street, but not the god within. Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. The only fun of being a Christian was that a man was not left alone with the Inner Light, but definitely recognized an outer light, fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners.⁵

Like most heresies, the *is equals ought* heresy is partially true. It grasps something we want to affirm; namely, that ethics must be rooted in ontology. That's just a fancy way of saying identity does shape obligation. Is *does* equal ought, if you have a doctrine of sin, regeneration, union with Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The great theologian of our age, Lady Gaga, was right: you were born that way. The good news of Jesus Christ is that you can be born again another way.

A Tale of Two Films

Think about two Pixar movies that came out ten years apart. In a movie review for *World* magazine, Collin Garbarino recently pointed out the difference between the movie *Brave* (2012) and

Don't Be True to Yourself

the movie *Turning Red* (2022).⁶ Both movies are coming-of-age mother-daughter stories. In both movies, the daughters feel constrained by their overbearing mothers. In both movies, the mom gets turned into an angry, out-of-control animal.

In *Turning Red*, the message is more about self-actualization, how we all have a messy side we need to let out. The daughter tells her mom, “My panda, my body”⁷ (echoing the slogan “my body, my choice”), and we are supposed to accept that the daughter (who can turn into a red panda) is right to chart her own path as long as she is true to herself.

But if you remember, the narrative arc in *Brave* was much different. There, the mother and the daughter realize they have both been proud. The torn tapestry is a symbol of their broken relationship, and they must “mend the bond torn by pride.”⁸ The lesson in *Brave* is about learning to say “sorry.” It’s a fun adventure movie that is really about repentance, forgiveness, and change. It’s about how being true to yourself can get you in trouble and hurt those around you.

Recall that line from Anna Quindlen: “The only right way [to behave] is to feel your heart hammering inside you and to listen to what its timpani is saying.”⁹ Rich Mullins offered a better way in his song, “The Maker of Noses.” After describing the dead end of following your heart and following your dreams, Mullins testifies that: “The Father of hearts and the

Maker of noses / and the giver of dreams [is] the one I have chosen / and I will follow Him.”¹⁰

Be Who You Are, but Die First

There is something right about our culture's obsession with authenticity. One of the chief ethical motivations in the New Testament is: be who you are. Which is why my provocative statement (“do not be true to yourself”) at the beginning needs some qualification. You should not be true to yourself, unless you have died to your old self and your new self is raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places. The real you *is* worth letting out *if* the real you is dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus.

The world says you are what you feel. The world says your *is equals ought*. The world says you must find yourself, be true to yourself, and express yourself. Jesus gave us a different and better way to live.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.
(John 12:24–25)