

How To Think Well *about* Identity

TOPIC

Who am I? What does my life mean? Every generation asks these questions, but ours has turned them into a full-time project. Scroll through your feed, and you'll find people building entire personal brands around self-discovery—curating identities, testing personas, chasing the next version of themselves. But Christians have something more unshakeable to offer than another self-improvement hack. We have an identity we didn't have to invent, and it's the only one built to hold the weight of a whole life.

THEOLOGY

Human identity was given to you, not invented by you.

The Bible tells us that our identity, purpose, and nature are all thought up by God. Author Marilyn Robinson calls this the “givenness” of our being—the sense that who we are was handed to us rather than assembled by us. The Bible names four truths about your identity:ⁱ

- You bear the image of God, which means you carry a worth no accomplishment could add to and no failure could take away.ⁱⁱ
- You are body and soul together, not one wearing the other like a costume.ⁱⁱⁱ
- You were built for relationship, wired by God to need other people.^{iv}
- You exist for God, made to know Him and enjoy Him.^v

That foundation doesn't need your approval to be true, and it's steadier than anything you could build on your own.

Sin twists how we see ourselves.

Genesis and Ecclesiastes both wrestle with why the search for meaning is so exhausting. Sin separates us from the God who gives us our identity as a gift, so we go looking for it elsewhere. The toil God describes in Genesis 3 isn't only about hard days at work—it's about how elusive meaning becomes when we try to build an identity apart from God's presence.

Because God became human, our identity can be restored.

Jesus took on everything it means to be human, except sin. He had a real body and soul and lived as the perfect image of God.^{vi} That's what makes His life both a pattern for us to follow and a source we can draw from. By redeeming us from our sin, and remaking us in Jesus' image, God is gifting us a new identity in Christ we didn't have to build ourselves.^{vii}

For Christians, the most important marker of our identity is union with Christ.

One of the most common identifications for Christians in the Bible is the phrase "in Christ."^{viii} Our union with Christ is at the heart of the gospel and our identity as a new creation. Colossians 3 spells out how we should live as people whose core identity is wrapped up in Jesus.

Being in Christ doesn't erase your individuality.

Being in Christ is the core of our identity, but we do not stop being individuals with distinct gifts, personalities, and callings. Paul uses the metaphor of the body to describe how individuals and community fit together in the church. We are distinct, but we were never meant to be distinct in isolation. We know ourselves best as individuals in the context of community.^{ix}

One day, who we are will be fully known.

In the New Creation, we will be eternally known by God and will never again have to search in vain to find ourselves.^x Revelation 22:5 says that in the Resurrection, the name of the Lord will be written upon us as the truest thing about who we are. This is true of us now, even while we live in the tension of sin and struggle to remember our identity. One day that struggle will end.

HISTORY

The early church already knew this tension.

Augustine wrote about restless hearts, always searching for their true home.^{xi} Ephrem the Syrian used clothing as a metaphor for what sin cost us: God made us to wear a "robe of glory," and after the fall, we're stuck patching together fig leaves and animal skins.^{xii} Jesus put on our humanity so that we could be re-clothed in God's image.^{xiii} Both writers concluded that our identity is only found and satisfied in Jesus.

Modernity cracked the door open for individuality.

In the Middle Ages, your place in the "order of being" was mostly fixed by your family, religion, nation, and job.^{xiv} There was little room for mobility. The industrial and scientific revolutions changed that, opening up space for people to imagine identity as something more personal, more chosen.

Late Modernity turned that opening into a worldview.

For the last 50 to 75 years, a worldview called "expressive individualism" has been the secular world's primary way of identifying who we are and what we are meant to do. The idea is simple to state and exhausting to live: you decide who you are, then you perform—or *express*—that self-determined identity to the world.^{xv}

INQUIRY

Our culture has built an entire world around individualism, and it's starting to buckle.

Sociologist Peter Berger used the term "plausibility structures" to describe the beliefs, conditions, and institutions that make a worldview seem true and livable. Right now, our culture plausibility structure runs on individualism—our freedom, our wealth, and an internet that makes anything look achievable, all of it conspiring to make self-invention feel expected rather than optional. But that structure is weaker it looks. People are burning out from striving to perform a satisfying identity, one post and one reinvention at a time. Christians have an opportunity to expose the lie behind individualism and offer something real: in Christ, we do not have to earn or perform an identity. We are much more than our careers, families, likes, follows, or our performance. Our identity is in Christ.

NUANCE

What about all the good that's come from empowering the individual?

Look back at history and you'll see the evils that came from trying to eliminate individual freedom. So, isn't it better now being able to decide for yourself who you really are? There's a grain of truth here. God gave humans free will, along with individual personalities, gifts, and callings. If we completely squash individuality, we are rejecting something God calls good. Christians should protect certain individual freedoms, such as in the Bill of Rights, so that humans may be free to live into their God-given diversity. But protecting the individual is different than basing our entire identity in our individuality. Expressive individualism leaves us hollow, unable to see our God-given identity or experience the redeemed identity the gospel offers.

What about people who've given up on meaning altogether?

As secular plausibility structures are exposed, some are losing hope that life has real purpose. Nihilism—the belief that there's no bigger meaning or purpose to life outside of the choices that we make—is spreading online. Philosopher Albert Camus put it starkly, “He who despairs of the human condition is a coward, but he who has hope for it is a fool...where there is no hope, we must invent it.”^{xvi} We just have to act like we have purpose. How do Christians lovingly respond to people who believe this, and give them real hope instead of pretend hope? One way is by living our Christian identity among our secular neighbors with true hope and resilience. We really do have the only way to a meaningful, joy-filled life and identity. We have a chance to show that to people who may never have seen a hopeful identity.

QUESTIONS

How have you noticed expressive individualism shaping the way you see yourself? Where might the gospel be inviting you to change?

If you more fully embraced your identity as an image-bearer of God, what would change in your life?

If someone close to you argued that identity is something you create for yourself, how would you respond, using both Scripture and the information above?

How do Christians effectively hold the tension of loving those who are confused about their identity while holding fast to the truth of the Bible?

ENDNOTES

- i Marilyn Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*
- ii Gen 1:26-27
- iii Gen 2:7
- iv Gen 2:18
- v 1 Cor 1:8
- vi Col 1:15
- vii Eph 4:24, Col 3:10, Rom 8:29, 2 Cor 5:17, Rom 6:4
- viii 2 Cor 5:17, Eph 2:10, Gal 1:22, 1 Cor 15:22, 1 Cor 1:30, Rom 8:1, Rom 8:10, Phil 1:1, Col 1:2, Heb 3:14, 1 Pet 5:14.
- ix 1 Cor 12. The entire chapter is about this very tension between distinct roles, gifting, calling, and identity with our common Christian identity. How do I maintain unity with the community while expressing the unique identity and calling God has given me? By following God's teaching in this chapter I can see a way forward in this godly tension.
- x Gal 4:9
- xi Augustine, *Confessions*. These early church resources are not Scripture, but do give us insight into what Church leaders have taught and believed for centuries. They help us to learn from the wisdom of past Christians, but do not hold the authority of the Bible.
- xii Gen. 3:7 and 21
- xiii Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise trans.* Sebastian Brock
- xiv C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*
- xv Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self and Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*
- xvi Albert Camus, *The Rebel*