

identity: achieved or received?

John Greenall explores true identity





John Greenall
is CMF Head of Student Ministries

my story

I always wanted to be a medical missionary. After all, why wouldn't you? You get to be like Jesus – healing bodies and souls. In any case, surely the best Christians are missionaries, and the best missionaries are medics! Just look at the need out there (eg 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty!)! Just consider the

unreached people groups where medicine can open doors.² But most of all – I'm willing to go; unlike most of the Christian medics I know who settle down in the UK with a home and family. How lukewarm. How half-hearted. And I spent years being impatient to get out of London and the UK and go – why? – because then I'll have made it. Then God will be pleased with me. Then I'll be *really* useful to him.

Fast-forward 14 years and yes, I'm still in the UK. I am not a medical missionary. I own a home. I have a family. And for years I have struggled with this 'suboptimal' course of my life. I have often subconsciously tried to gain approval from God. I am my own harshest critic, often unwilling to forgive myself for many of my shortcomings despite accepting God's forgiveness (which is pretty arrogant when you consider it). In short, my identity has been based in seeing my achievements (or lack of) driving my significance

– and being crushed when I haven't attained my goals, including overseas mission.

identity defined

Identity can be defined both as the way in which I see myself, and the thing that gives me a positive sense of worth.

How do you view yourself? Are you first and foremost a medical student? Are you the best medical student (i.e. one who studies at King's?³).

When do you feel most Christian? Is it when you grow in understanding through Bible study or books and can explain your faith to others? Is it when you experience God in worship? Is it when you're on a mission trip overseas? Is it when things are 'going well' for example, you're having consistent quiet times? Are you becoming a 'really good Christian'?

The thing is, how do you respond when someone asks you a question you don't know the answer to? What about when God seems absent and you question your very faith? What about when the overseas mission doesn't happen due to illness or other factors? What happens when you miss your times with God, be it through busyness, tiredness or sin?

Overall, does your identity hold firm when your performance stutters? Do your achievements and/or experiences define your significance and value to God? Do you *really* know who you are?

identity: epidemiology

Identity disorder in Christians is unfortunately surprisingly common. A particular at-risk group is Christian medical students and doctors. We are highly vulnerable to confusing and forgetting our true identity.

After all, we have worked very hard to get where we are. Harder than many of our friends; we deserve to be here; we secretly enjoy the

respect of others when the old lady at church says 'it's so wonderful you're at medical school, your parents must be so proud!'

Furthermore, we are in a profession where we do significant things. We save lives. We have the power to change the course of people's existence.

And we are often busy people – long hours, involved in church, CU, CMF, and many other things – so busy that we perhaps forget the most important bit – knowing Jesus; spending time with him; being transformed into his likeness; understanding our true identity.

This is my first article for *Nucleus*, and my first words to you as a medical student are said deliberately: *Knowing your true identity as you go through medical school is the one thing that changes everything*. Knowing what God thinks of you and clinging on to that will take you through the storms of success and disappointment and will keep you from the idols of cynicism, apathy, comfort and placing your identity in career and status.

identity: pathogenesis

And yet we can struggle to grasp our true identity. Why? Here are just two reasons:

a. identity creation – the encroaching prevailing culture

There has been a corrosion of identity in the Western World since the Industrial Revolution. Secularisation has meant a draining of meaning from public life. Meaning and identity (including religion) have now become a private, leisure time activity. Instead of, as in traditional societies, your identity being received – where individuals sacrifice their own needs and wants for the good of the community – in modern society identity is created. Before, the message was 'you are your duties', now it is 'you are your dreams'.

Nowadays, diverse and pervasive media technologies question traditional authorities. How can any single view be absolutely true? They promote a view of identity as fragmentary (obtained from diverse sources) and flexible (enabling one to experience as much as possible – whether your identity is consistent or not is not essential). Of course this can be liberating – people are free to construct themselves; but equally it can lead to great anxiety – we really don't know who we are at a deep level. Even religion is seen as a journey to find the 'real me, the spiritual me – me as definer of my reality, me as creator, me as sustainer...'⁴

knowing your true identity as you go through medical school is the one thing that changes everything

Of course, any sense of emotional wellbeing is dependent on realising this idealised identity – if you can live up to it then you are happy – if not, then your sense of self is threatened. The big question in our society today is 'we are free to pursue happiness through identity creation or exploration (even noble exploits like medical mission) but will we find it?'

It is important that we recognise these trends amongst the patients we will meet because people are desperately searching for an identity. In medicine we meet people whose fragile, created identity crumbles when under the scrutiny of illness, bereavement or other pressure. Will we offer a better story?

And yet of course there is a deeper cause to our identity crisis, and that is all due to something called Noddle and the great identity theft.

b. identity theft

The book of Genesis outlines wonderfully how God created human beings in his image – to be like God; to reflect his glory; to show what he is like; to rule over the earth.⁵ This has profound implications – we are human because of who we are (image-bearers of God), not what we do.⁶ Our identity is outlined clearly and profoundly from the beginning.

This is why the account of the fall is so tragic⁷ – it's about losing identity. Adam and Eve were in a perfect relationship with God and with each other. No guilt, no shame.⁸

But then, something happens. The devil in the form of a snake tells Eve that God is being a bit strict. 'You don't need to do everything God says, do you? He's just trying to annoy you, because he can'. 'Go on' he says, 'just have a taste'.⁹ So Eve has a dilemma. Listen to God, believe him or believe the snake. Hold onto their identity as images of God, as those who have dominion over creation, as those who reflect God's glory. Or listen to a lie – try and forget that God is there – maybe he won't see. You ever feel that forgetfulness? We see this all through the Bible – God's people forgetting who he is, what he has done. They forget who they are. And we can too.

The consequences for Adam and Eve were not happiness and joy. No, instead it was guilt (knowing they had fallen short of the mark) and shame (a deep uneasiness not about what they had done, but who they are).

Of course the same is happening today. People are still hiding from God. They don't know their identity anymore. And tragically, Christians can feel the same. The devil is still accusing us,¹⁰ trying to make us forget our identity as forgiven children of God. Just like my computer program Noddle looks for

suspicious activity on my bank accounts to prevent identity theft, so we need to be looking out for suspicious activity because the devil is out to steal identities.¹¹

identity: symptoms and signs

a. significance Christianity

In this state, our significance is obtained through our achievements or status rather than the other way around. We see Jesus understanding his identity clearly at his baptism ('You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'¹²) and elsewhere.¹³ Jesus was affirmed for who he was before he did what he did. And the same goes for us today who believe in him. As competent, typically hardworking, well-respected students and doctors, we urgently need our significance to flow from holding onto the gospel which tells me that my significance comes from being 'in Christ'. Once we understand that we are accepted by God, and sustained by his word and fellowship with others, then we will gain a valid sense of significance/status/identity – we will know who we are. This solid foundation then gives rise to achievements (or good works¹⁴) which are not based on a *need* to be accepted, but which come from knowing that we *are* accepted. Rather than what we *do* determining who we *are*, we must grasp that who God says we *are* determines what we *do*. Just sit in Ephesians 1 and 2; let it sink in. You are adopted, redeemed, loved, forgiven, sealed, blessed, chosen, holy, blameless, made alive, saved, seated in heavenly realms, bought near, citizens of God's household...and there are so many other passages to meditate on.¹⁵ This is your significance as a Christian!

b. performance Christianity

Not knowing who we are can lead to us trying

to audition for a role that we have already got. I can't stand The X Factor, but from what I know of it lots of hopefuls turn up and audition to get through to boot camp and ultimately win a record deal. The acts desperately try and register approval with the judges and get through to the next round. Yet as Christian medics we can slip into the error of trying to register approval with God and chase affirmation from him and other people (maybe our parents, our colleagues, even ourselves). But the message of the gospel is 'you don't have to perform any activity to register approval with God. You've got the part. Now play it'.¹⁶

Knowing this identity keeps us from performance because it gives us the stability of knowing our worth with certainty. As Tim Keller says 'If successful, it keeps you from having head inflated, if disappointed it keeps you from falling. Because it isn't based on performance'.¹⁷ This performance might extend to even good things like praying, obeying the ten commandments – when we try and perform in these ways it can crush us just as much.

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This performance anxiety can show itself in the way we can compare ourselves to others; from one extreme ('I'll never be as good at evangelism that she is' or, 'I wish I was as good as counselling patients as he is') to the other (my looking down at others for not being as committed as me is a prime example!). All in all, 'gospel-centred discipleship is not about how we perform, but who we are – imperfect people, clinging to a perfect Christ, being perfected by the Spirit'.¹⁸

identity: the cure

Listen to God. And believe what he says. Then be who you are in Christ.

In all the competing noise of our studies, our social lives, our smart phones, even our Christian events – make space to sit in God’s word; to read and pray; and allow God to speak to you. Ask him to help you forgive yourself when you don’t meet your expectations. Ask him to reveal to you that you are fully accepted not because of what you do, but because he has chosen you and he loves you. And get into community, the only place that the world will truly see who God is, because God is in community and he places us in community. In community our identity is tied up with those around us, and together we express the identity of God himself.¹⁹

That is why we connect, learn and serve together in CMF. Because as medics we need to encourage each other to remember our true identity – not primarily as medics – but as sons and daughters of God. Not as saviours, but those who point to the saviour. Not those who achieve our identity and status in our medicine, but who receive it from God. And we meet to look outwards, and be equipped to recognise identity crises in our peers, colleagues and patients and to address them biblically. Perhaps study the book of Ephesians together; do the Confident Christianity or Saline Solution course (just contact the office for details); hold a lunchbar event on the subject of identity... you get the idea...

So let me leave you with the good news about identity:

- What you *do* stems from who you *are*.
- Your identity is *received* rather than *achieved*.
- You work *from* identity not *for* identity.

- Our identity is given by God and only found in Jesus Christ.
- What good news we have. What a glorious gospel! ■

questions to ponder

1. Do you find your identity and significance in being a medical student? Or a CMF member? Or this or that? Or are you truly significant because Jesus speaks that over you before you do anything?
2. Are there areas in which you tend to ‘perform’ for God? Do you compare yourselves to others rather than resting in who God says you are? Talk to God about this now.
3. As Christians our identity is found in community.²⁰ How is this good news for colleagues and patients we meet? How do we model this in our CMF groups; our churches; our medical schools?

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