

# who am I really?

Ashley Stewart explores what the Bible has to say







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**In a world where you can be anything, be kind.**

Printed on a poster, these words greet me every time I walk into the school where I counsel. In one way I agree: we can choose to treat others in various ways and, of course, we should always choose kindness. But this statement makes the philosophical assumption that we don't simply choose to act how we want, but that we can choose to be anything we want. It assumes that we create our own identity. This idea is rooted in existentialism, an atheistic philosophy which argues that a person's 'meaning' is created only by their actions and what they make of their life.<sup>1</sup> Existentialism has pervaded our culture and been accepted unquestioningly because we like to believe that we are in control. Our society worships at the altars of autonomy and individualism. With the mantras of 'you can be anything you set your mind to' and 'you write your own story' being chanted in our ears, we can fail to recognise our culture's assumption that we are not creatures fashioned by God, but are instead our own creators, the gods of this age. Society also says that your identity and sense

of self is based upon how you experience your inner world: your thoughts, feelings, beliefs and ideas. Therefore, no-one else can tell you who you really are, this is 'your truth' to discover by looking within. 'There is no truth...so I can be whatever I say that I am.'<sup>2</sup> However, if my thoughts and feelings can change drastically over time, how do I ever know who I truly am?

We all need to ground our identity in something, otherwise we would have no sense of purpose and direction, no sense of where we fit in the world. So, what do most people try to base their identity on? For most of us we look to the various social categories we fit into: our age, gender, ethnicity and culture, our occupation or roles such as student, our relational status, abilities and achievements, personality traits and even our likes and dislikes. This is understandable because these categories are important to us, they help us feel a sense of belonging, yet at the same time they describe the various factors which combine to make us unique. 'Categories themselves are not wrong...the problem comes when we ask these categories to do more than they can do – when we ask them to hold all that we are.'<sup>3</sup>

For example, I could say that I am a woman, a medic, a counsellor, I'm Northern Irish, a besotted auntie, a dog-lover, an outgoing introvert and a compulsive tea-drinker. I am all these things, yet they do not describe all that I am. In fact, none of them describe the core of who I am, none of them define my identity or tell me what my purpose is in life. John Calvin said 'without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self';<sup>4</sup> therefore the only way that I can find and live out my true identity is not to look within myself but instead to look beyond myself, to Jesus to discover who he is and who he says that I am.

The Bible tells us that, since the rebellion of Adam and Eve, everyone has been born under the curse of sin and death.<sup>5</sup> However, for those of us

who have trusted in Christ to forgive our sin this curse has been lifted, we have been made truly alive to enjoy eternal unbroken relationship with God and have each become a 'new creation'.<sup>6</sup> We have a new identity. Even if we know this in our minds, many of us fail to understand it truly, and so fail to believe it and live it out. Many of us still look primarily to our achievements, appearance, roles and relationships to find our sense of worth and purpose, all the while claiming our identity is 'rooted in Christ'.

So, what is this identity we have been given in Christ and how should this shape our minds and our lives? There are numerous aspects of this identity we could explore, but I have chosen simply to focus on four as an introduction to this topic.

## the foundation of every Christian's identity should be the truth that we are dearly loved by our heavenly father

### beloved child of God

*'See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!'* (1 John 3:1)

Sinclair Ferguson says that being a child of God 'is the way – not the *only* way, but the *fundamental* way – for the Christian to think about himself or herself. Our self-image, if it is to be biblical, will begin just there.'<sup>7</sup> Just as a child's sense of self is shaped by how their parents relate to them, the foundation of every Christian's identity should be the truth that we are dearly loved by our heavenly Father. Satan wants to deceive us into believing that we are slaves who need constantly to work harder to earn God's favour, or that we are orphans abandoned by God, unloved and unprotected. This is not true.<sup>8</sup> We are beloved children who can never be separated from the love of our Father.<sup>9</sup> When we rest secure in our Father's love then we no longer need to seek out the approval and acceptance of others; instead we long to please our Father above

all and delight to be in his presence and obey his commands.

### God's image-bearers

*'So God created mankind in his own image....'*  
(Genesis 1:27)

From the creation narrative we see that humanity was created to reflect God's glory; to mirror his beauty and goodness for all to see. However, since the fall this image has been shattered beyond recognition and marred by sin. Yet for those in Christ Jesus, the Spirit is working within us to transform us into the likeness of Christ so that we can increasingly live out our purpose as image-bearers. However, this transformation can only occur by continually gazing upon the beauty of Christ and allowing the Spirit the time and space to work within us. If we truly understood that we are designed to reflect the image of God, then we would spend much less time worrying about how others view us and more time focusing on how we can glorify God and point others towards him. We would also prioritise spending time with God and praying for the Spirit to produce fruit in our lives.

### member of the body of Christ

*'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'* (1 Peter 2:9)

As explored earlier, our western society, with its individualistic mindset, preaches the lie that identity is found by looking inside yourself and discovering who you are or creating who you would like to be. It is all about you as an individual. However, we must reject this idea. In the above verse we see that God rescued us in order to have a 'people', 'nation', 'priesthood' and 'race' for himself. None of these words describe individual Christians but instead describe the church as a whole: we are saved to be members of the body of Christ. We are created for community. This longing



for authentic connection with others is the imprint of a relational God who has forever existed within the community of the Trinity and has designed us for relationship with himself and others. It is in relationship with God and his people that we find out who we truly are and can fully live out our identity. By loving, serving, teaching and admonishing each other the church is able to 'proclaim the excellencies' of God and reflect his glory in a way that no individual ever could.<sup>10</sup>

### citizen of heaven

*'But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.'*  
(Philippians 3:20)

CS Lewis once said 'I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country'.<sup>11</sup> We all long for home, whether that is found in a certain place or in the relationships we are part of: we long to feel loved, to feel safe, to find comfort and to belong.<sup>12</sup> The problem many Christians face is that we forget where our true home is and look to meet our deepest longings in the things of this world. However, the things of this world are transient: relationships might disappoint or hurt us, loved ones may die, countries might be ravaged by war or our houses destroyed in floods.

Yet Christians have an eternal home with Christ and our citizenship is in heaven, not on this earth. If we truly grasped this aspect of our identity, we would try to hold the things of this world more lightly. We would place our hope in Christ alone, recognising that this world is fragile and will eventually pass away. Likewise, we would invest more time, energy and finances in building his kingdom and laying up for ourselves treasure in heaven that can never be stolen nor destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

### so, who am I really?

This is a massive topic of which we have only scratched the surface, but by exploring just four aspects of our identity in Christ we can see how a deeper conviction of this identity would change

how we view ourselves and live out our purpose in this world. Therefore, let us live as beloved children secure in our Father's love, reflecting the likeness of Christ, devoted to the Body of Christ and eagerly awaiting our true home with him. ■



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