

TUTORIAL
7.11

Understanding true identity

This tutorial introduces the area of *Identity*, and discusses the first question in that area: 'Are they increasingly clear about - and able to articulate - their true identity from God's perspective?'

Last time

We reminded ourselves that although, obviously, it is possible for an isolated individual or handful of people to be saved and even to begin to grow spiritually, real maturity is meant to happen within an *ecclesia*, a local church body. Learning to make *use* of God's Word as He intends (the focus of the fifth W.I.L.D. question) is something that only really happens within a supportive community of believers.

Using an agricultural metaphor, we defined three areas of practical use that God has given His Word for: *Nurture* - the spiritual food and protection that believers need in their daily lives. *Shape* - the discipline and correction from God's Word that produces holiness and freedom in Christ. *Propagate* - the motivation and ability to reach out faithfully with God's Message to others.

Identity

Now we want to go on to consider the second of the four W.I.L.D. lenses that we're using to observe situations where Truth is being shared. Of the four, *Identity* often seems to be the one that is most challenging to really understand. That may be because it's a fairly abstract concept. The dictionary defines *Identity* as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is"; and to help clarify, it adds, "the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is". Hmmm, well that clears it up, doesn't it?

Of course in the everyday world we use things like names, photographs, birth certificates, driver's licences and credit cards to establish identity. But that doesn't go very far in helping us understand *who* someone really is. We can find out a lot more if we get a chance to hear their story.

It happens regularly on aeroplanes, doesn't it? During the course of the flight, total strangers sitting next to each other share a lot of their identities with each

other - or at least what they want to project. Often their stories come out in bits and pieces...where they're going, where they're from, what they do for work, if they're married or not. They don't usually start out by saying, "Hey, can I share my identity? Let me tell you who I am." But if they keep talking, you usually find out a lot about the way they view themselves.

And on a more casual level, it's a process going on all the time. We see someone on the street and based on their facial features, the way they dress, their hairstyle, who they're with, their accent...and numerous other subtle things, we 'place' them; we figure out some things about their identity. We're not naturally objective about this. Usually without realising, our cultural norms and personal preferences create the categories we use for establishing identity: this person's status, their place in society, how we view them and how we feel we should relate to them.

Using those same, mostly subconscious categories, we also try to project something about ourselves. What we wear is often not just a practical decision; we are conveying something to others about how we see ourselves and how we want to be seen. And this often changes depending on the setting - our clothes, yes, but also the message we're sending. The way we present ourselves, and therefore the identity we assume, is influenced by the identity and opinions of those we're with. Because we don't exist in a vacuum, identity is a kind of synthesis of the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. *Who am I in my family? Among my peers? In my church?*

Group identity

These principles relating to identity are true for groups as well as for individuals. Groups have internal definitions for themselves, but then they are also defined by external categorizations. So although a group's sense of identity is shaped by its past, it is also constantly being reshaped by the present. For example, the way a minority ethnic group is seen by a larger, dominant group, impacts their own sense of identity. If they are valued because their presence somehow benefits the community, then the ways they identify themselves will reflect a positive, secure sense of being. If, on the other hand, they are despised and mistrusted as a group, they might react by strengthening and hiding *behind* their ethnic identity as though under siege, or by trying to assimilate and escape the evidence of their ethnicity.

That leads to another observation. For a group to even exist as a group means defining not only who they *are* but also who they *are not*. Who is "us" and who is "them"? And that gets to the very significant issue of boundaries. How a group defines who's in and who's not, says a lot about what kind of group they are - in reality as well as how they and others perceive them.

Some groups are very casual: for example, *people travelling in Istanbul on Tuesday*. Others are more definite but ad hoc: for example, *passengers on the*

Turkish Airlines Tuesday morning flight from Istanbul to Moscow. Some are much more formally defined: the aircrew on that Turkish Airlines flight. Others are quite definite, but more relationally fixed: the family sitting in row 38. Others are bounded by mutual interests: members of a music lovers club from London on their way to Moscow for a concert at the Bolshoi Theatre.

Obviously we could spend a lot of time on this, but here are a few tentative observations:

- There many different kinds - almost an infinite variety - of groups.
- We can “belong” to many different overlapping groups.
- *Purpose* often has something to do with group identity.
- There are many ways of defining the “in-or-out” boundaries of a group.
- How those boundaries are defined impacts and reflects on the way individuals view their membership in the group.

We’ll talk a lot more about groups and make some specific applications in upcoming tutorials. Hopefully, even in this brief introduction, we’re seeing that the issue of identity is a complex one. But it’s also extremely important - not least of all to us as we’re trying to evaluate how effectively Truth is being shared in a given situation.

Taking on His identity

One day in a hilly area at the head of the Jordan river valley, Jesus prompted His disciples to consider this topic of identity in light of how well people were understanding the Truth He’d been sharing (Matthew 16:13-16). But He didn’t ask about people’s sense of their own identity. He wanted to put the spotlight on something much more foundational: who the people understood that *He* was. And then, of course, He went on to ask the disciples who *they* understood Him to be. Peter’s answer demonstrated that the substrate of Truth was firmly in place for him by correctly identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. This truth, Jesus said, was the foundation on which He’d build His Church.

Another time, when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father (John 14:8-11), Jesus questioned how much His disciple has understood from being with Him. He should know by now that Jesus and God the Father are one. They are one in essential being, one in identity. Jesus said that this understanding comes by faith and through observing Him in action...seeing that everything He does is just as the Father would do it.

Years later, in a letter to the believers in Philippi, the apostle Paul shared how coming to know Jesus had radically impacted his view of himself (Philippians 3:5-9). His words portray a strong sense of how proud he’d formerly been of his identity - impeccable religious credentials, first-class education, ethnically pure, faultless family background - but when Jesus identified Himself so

dramatically to the young Pharisee now lying on the road, he'd suddenly seen himself in a completely different light. All the previous tags and labels he'd been so proud of were shown up as pathetic and worthless. Everything had been totally eclipsed by the opportunity to share an identity with Jesus and to be covered by His righteousness before God.

Someone responding in faith to Truth that's shared effectively with them will come to a correct understanding of who God is and who Jesus Christ is. And that understanding is the only correct basis from which a human being can understand who they are. As we've thought about before, humans are taken up with themselves and telling their own stories, of reaffirming to themselves and others that they are someone of value. But what they really need is to stop thinking and talking about themselves and to listen to God tell His Story, to hear Him as Creator and Father describe Himself. Intertwined in His Narrative, of course, is the true account of who He made humans to be. Created in His image for specific purposes, tasked with being caretakers of His Creation (as we briefly noted above, *identity* and *purpose* are very closely related concepts). But then the Fall... and the identity fundamentally shifts. Now Adam's offspring are broken, excluded, followers of God's Enemy, rebellious, guilty. And yet, because of His grace, the human race is still loved by God, the ones He seeks after, the ones He promises to save.

At some point then, individuals need to find themselves standing before God's throne, with all their sense of self, their pride in who they are, everything society and Satan tells them they are...with all of that stripped away. Now seeing themselves as He sees them, who they actually are; sinful, needy, hopeless, guilty, but still loved. Then to find themselves standing at the foot of the Cross, seeing the One who is worthy in their place, having taken on Himself *their* identity as the condemned. Later, before the empty tomb, with all the wonderful implications: now they are the risen, the forgiven, the redeemed, a new creation, and children of God.

The first question under “I” for *Identity*

- Are they increasingly clear about - and able to articulate - their true identity from God's perspective?
- Are they learning to see their story embedded in the larger Narrative of the Church, stretching back to Pentecost and forward to Christ's return?
- Are they growing in their understanding of the bonds that unite them to the global/local Body under Christ as its Head?
- Are they learning to view others according to truth, and rejecting the divisions, biases and tensions that often define the wider society?
- Are they growing in their understanding of how to appropriately represent the Lord in their current spheres of contact and in others He might lead them to be involved in?

Obviously we can't expect every believer - young or old - to be able to give an exhaustive, theological treatise on his or her identity. But questions that touch on the topic and give someone an opportunity to reflect on how God sees them, are well worth including in a conversation. We might ask them to reflect on how they once saw themselves, before they came to know the Lord, in contrast to how they see themselves now. We might be able to ask directly how they believe God sees them now, and why. And at some point we would be echoing Jesus' question to His disciples and ask them who they understand that He is.

So what kind of responses would encourage us that their engagement with Truth is proving to be effective? We would hear them, first of all, focusing more on God than themselves. Anything they say that highlights Him, His majesty, righteousness and grace would obviously demonstrate a foundational understanding. And of course their thoughts and words would move naturally to speak of Jesus Christ, as their Lord and Saviour. It would be reassuring to hear them reflect on how their former perspective had changed, how they'd come to see themselves as lost and hopeless before God. And we'd be excited if they expressed a conviction that now, because of Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf, they are forgiven, cleansed, righteous in God's eyes.

And conversely, it would be very troubling to find that someone who has been exposed to the Bible was still talking mostly about themselves, still trying to affirm their value as a person, and giving indications that they see themselves as inherently worthy before God.

If you have been through the Biblical Foundations part of these *AccessTruth* materials, you'll remember that in Module 2, before moving further into the Acts account of the early Church, we took some time to review what we had already covered from God's Narrative in Module 1. The difference, you'll recall, is that in Module 2 we looked back through the lens of all that Jesus has accomplished on our behalf. We celebrated the new identity that every believer has in Christ.

When we celebrate this new identity though, we also remember that we're not alone in this new life and identity. As we stand *in Christ*, it's alongside others who've also been born again. As we celebrate being rescued in the ark, as it were, protected by God's mercy and grace from the desolation outside, we find ourselves there with others who've also entered through the One door. We can each enjoy amazing personal access to God, but He also wants His children to join together at times in worship before His throne.

So when we consider a situation in which people are being exposed to God's Word, and we try to gauge whether they have a growing understanding of their true identity from God's perspective, it's not only about them as individuals. We

would also be listening for indications that they have some sense of themselves as individual children of God within His family. It would certainly be a positive sign that Truth was being shared effectively if they were to speak about how God sees them *in Christ* along with everyone else who has put their faith in Him.

On the other hand, it would cause us real concern to find that the person's primary identity as a Christian seemed to be all about church or denominational affiliation; if they continually related their faith to a cultural or family tradition, to social obligation, to "going to church", rather than to personal, but shared, understanding, conviction and relationship with the Lord.

A final thought. As we consider how we can assess a situation in which God's Word is being shared (personal discipleship, small group, a church, etc.), we are not suggesting that we assume a sense of superiority, habitually critiquing every such situation we come across. First and foremost, this W.I.L.D. framework is intended to give us categories and resources for evaluating efforts to share God's Word that we are personally involved in.

On the other hand, we often do find ourselves needing to consider something being described or a situation we're observing first-hand. As we discussed in the introductory tutorials, there are numerous models for evangelism and church planting out there, and more being developed all the time. And it is important that we have in mind some areas that we believe are consistent with God's purposes when strategies are suggested or when claims are made. Hopefully we're convinced that whoever is sharing with who, whatever the form it takes, the context, the time-frames, the numbers, the circumstances...the sharing of God's Word should result in people becoming increasingly clear about, and able to articulate, their true identity from God's perspective.

Some extra questions

To go along with the first question in the area of *Identity*, 'Are they increasingly clear about - and able to articulate - their true identity from God's perspective?', we can also ask:

- *Are they having their assumptions about who they are challenged and shaped by God's Word as it reveals who He is, how He sees needy human beings, and the implications of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross?*
- *Are they able to explain that they've been given a new life and identity in Christ, totally through the work of God's Spirit, and not through any inherent worthiness of their own?*
- *Are they realising that although they are individual children of God, they are also a part of His family - a corporate identity defined by a shared relationship with Jesus Christ?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

Understanding true identity

1. When you read the Bible are you very conscious of what it is saying about who you are? Have you ever, for example, read one of the New Testament epistles looking specifically through that lens; i.e. what is being expressed (either directly or assumed) about the identity of God the Father, Son and Spirit, the author, the original recipients, believers, unbelievers, the Church, yourself? Any thoughts about this?
2. Consider some of the groups you are part of and try to identify the boundaries that define each of them. What determines membership? Who are the “us” and who are “them”?
3. For someone in our society hearing God’s Word taught clearly for the first time, what do you think might be some of the obstacles in their worldview that might prevent them coming to a clear understanding of how God sees them?



ACTIVITIES

Understanding true identity

1. Look for opportunities to talk to someone about their sense of self, who they see themselves to be, as an individual and as part of any groups they feel they belong to. If possible, have this conversation with an unbeliever and a believer. Then record any observations you care to about:
 - How difficult you found it to get into conversations about this topic.
 - The kinds of things you said and the questions you asked to open up the conversation.
 - Any insights you gained through the process.