

TUTORIAL
7.12

The Narrative of the Church

This tutorial continues to discuss the area of *Identity*, and looks at the second question in that area: ‘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?’

Last time

We moved into the next W.I.L.D. area of Identity and began to grapple with this complex and potentially abstract concept. We thought about how even in brief encounters we use what are often subconscious categories to identify people...also that, intentionally or not, we are always projecting something about who we see ourselves to be. We also touched briefly on how our individual identity is linked to the groups we’re a part of...and the way these different groups are determined by their boundaries. We then looked at the first question under “I” for Identity and considered what kinds of things would indicate that someone’s view of their identity was being aligned to who God says they are.

The second 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?

You’ll certainly be aware by now, particularly if you’ve engaged with Modules 1 and 2 in this *AccessTruth* material, of the importance we place on the description of God as Author and the Bible as His Narrative. We’ve discussed a

number of reasons for that, but we want to explore it again here in light of this current topic - an individual and a group of believers gaining clarity about how to define who they are based on God's perspective.

Our identity in His

Implicit in Satan's lie to human beings in the beginning and ever since, is that "like gods" - like small creators and authors in our own right - we can say who we actually are, and are able to shape an identity for ourselves as individuals and communities. He says that we can find our place in the universe and say, "This is who I am" or, "This is who we are." The reality of course is that we don't have an identity or a story of our own. It's only against the backdrop of who God is, as He reveals Himself to us, that we have an identity and can know who we actually are. So when someone comes to faith and then grows on to maturity, it can be described as a process of them learning who they are as individuals within Christ's Ecclesia.

When someone suffers from amnesia, they lose part of their own story: either a brief moment, an episode, or even whole chunks of memories from their past. In extreme cases, known as *fugue*, there is a total loss of identity, often involving the person physically running away from their normal environment. (The word *fugue* comes from the Latin 'fuga' for *flight*.)

A famous case of *fugue*, and one of the first documented, was the real man who Jason Bourne - from the Ludlum books and popular movies - was named after. In 1887 Ansel Bourne, a preacher from Rhode Island, USA, was supposed to go and visit his sister's house a few miles away. Instead, without any memory of how it happened, he woke up one morning two months later, over 300 kilometres away in Pennsylvania, shocked to find he'd used all his savings to open a variety store there under the name Albert J. Brown.

Whether from physical trauma or physiological causes, people experiencing amnesia or the more extreme *fugue* have their personal stories disrupted, and this has significant results for their sense of identity. Something related happens when people migrate voluntarily to find 'a better life', or when they're suddenly forced to flee their homes as refugees. They often experience dislocation from the assumptions of selfhood they've always had. As time goes by, the personal and societal narratives that gave them a sense of security become less and less applicable. They no longer fit into the individual and corporate identity from their original community, and often never really fit into where they settle either, because the history of this new country and society is not theirs.

The apostle Paul told the believers in Corinth that, "...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The plot line of their lives had taken a radical, irreversible

turn. There is a disconnect between who they used to be before coming to faith in Jesus Christ and who they will be from now on.

In his letter to “God’s chosen people” who were part of the Jewish diaspora in the Roman provinces of modern day Turkey, Peter says that they once lived in darkness *without an identity* (1 Peter 2:9-12), Now God has brought them into His light where they have an identity, purpose, and meaningful roles. Yes, they look the same, live in the same houses, eat the same food, but they’re different. They have been given full membership in a people group that’s defined by much more important things than human language, ethnicity and history. Their lives now tell a story that is totally different to the accepted cultural narratives of their unbelieving friends, families and neighbours.

My name is Usman. I live in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountain range. A while ago I got to know a foreigner from Switzerland who stayed in town for a year as part of a clean water aid project. We first met when this guy, Philippe, came into my small bicycle repair shop to buy a new tire. Then he started dropping by regularly to drink tea and practise speaking Khowar, my language. After a while we started talking about religious matters and eventually we began studying the Holy Books of Tawrat (the Torah), and Injil (the Gospels). I came to believe with all my heart that Isa (Jesus) is God’s Son, the true, final prophet...and His death is the only sacrifice for sin that God can accept.

The Swiss guy is gone now, and life has certainly become more challenging. So far, at least my brothers haven’t been violent as some might be to demonstrate their own piety, but I’m certainly no longer welcome at family gatherings. For a time I kept attending the mosque, but increasingly I felt like a stranger there and seldom go now, even on Fridays. I used to be a regular at the monthly gatherings of the town’s businessmen, but a delegation of former friends came around to my shop a while back and told me to stay away. At first my wife was bitter about my new faith and threatened to take our daughter back to her mother’s place in a village across the river, but I’ve tried to treat her with love and respect and lately she’s been asking questions. There’s no translation of the Bible in Khowar but I read it in Urdu even though I don’t understand everything in that language.

The hardest thing though is...how do I explain it? It’s a sense of no longer belonging to anything. Of being cut off. Of feeling like I no longer really fit anywhere. I ask myself who I am now. Most of the ways I would once have described myself to a stranger no longer seem accurate. People here call me Murtid an apostate, and a Nasraani, a Christian, but they mean a follower of a western religion and culture, with many bad connotations. That’s not who I am. I’ve heard there are churches in some cities, but I’ve never been to one. Recently I got talking with an older couple here in town who I think might believe in Isa, Jesus. Maybe we can meet sometimes. Philippe, the aid worker,

taught me that I am a child of God, a disciple of Isa...but he left before I felt I fully understood what that means. I pray to God to help me understand who I am and what I belong to now.

The identity of the early Church

The book of Acts in many ways is a story of identity. It starts out with a small group of people, mostly from a Jewish cultural and religious background, and many with regional (Galilean) connections. But their primary distinction was that they were followers of an itinerant Rabbi, a Teacher, who they were sure was the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. After His return to Heaven, this small band stayed on in Jerusalem, as He'd instructed. Clearly there was some sense of common identity, but it wasn't until after the Holy Spirit arrived on the day of Pentecost that they really began to have a presence in the community as a distinct group.

They are immediately forced to deal with the reality of being a minority group within a larger unbelieving and increasingly hostile community. They wrestle with issues of identity. Baptism and celebrating the Lord's Supper are important symbolic practices that help to define them. But what does it mean, exactly, to be people of this New Covenant? Who are *God's chosen people* now? How can you be a Jew and also follower of Jesus? Should they attend temple ceremonies? How should they define themselves in Jerusalem, or in the outlying regions of Israel? Certainly they are followers of Jesus, but should anything else define and distinguish them as sharing a common identity? And, as the Gospel spreads around the Mediterranean, how should believers relate to the Jewish synagogue system, to Greek philosophy, the Roman Empire, to animistic, pagan neighbours?

The great comfort is that they are not left alone to wrestle with these issues. All the time, God is continuing to reveal Truth and unfold His Story for them. As Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit is with each of them, and with them as a Group, a Church. He's giving special prophetic insights to chosen individuals who speak on God's behalf to the Church; being a New Covenant believer means having access to God's ongoing revelation. The teaching of the apostles itself represents a defining, distinguishing feature for individuals, for local ecclesia, and for the entire Church. Just as the writings of Moses and the prophets defined God's people under the Old Covenant, access to the verbal, then written, teaching of the apostles defines the new Ecclesia.

At the same time, through the apostles' teaching, God is making very specific declarations to these believers about *who* they are. And as we've already noted, identity is inextricably linked to purpose. At the beginning of his first letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul says that God has called them His *holy people*. And their purpose? They are intended to live and work in partnership with His Son, Jesus Christ. To the Ephesians, the apostle writes that they are

members of the *Body of Christ* with the goal of reaching individual and corporate maturity (Ephesians 4:12-13). The early churches are told they are *God's temple*, a place for His Spirit to live on earth. A living *letter* from God through which He communicates to the community. They are *witnesses, light, salt, living sacrifices*. And there's a future component to their identity and purpose as well. They are the *Bride* of God's Son, the *New Jerusalem*, made to be His perfect companion, to give glory to their Redeemer and Lord for eternity.

A connected identity

Hopefully the connections between the insights God gave the early Church to deal with the identity issues that perplexed them, and the similar issues facing a new believer or church today are obvious. Our second question under "I" for *Identity* prompts us to consider whether they are "*learning to see their story embedded in the larger Narrative of the Church.*" Just like the first believers in Jerusalem or Colossae, a young Christian today, whether in London or a small town in the Hindu Kush, faces the reality of disconnection from their past, dislocation from their place in their community, and disorientation in identity. Fellowship with others in a similar situation is obviously important, but it is also possible - in fact very common - for groups of believers never to really come to the right conclusions about who they are or why they are even there.

People can't exist in an 'identity vacuum': i.e. without some perception of who they are. Physiologically disturbed individuals are said to be suffering from *fugue* because they've created fictional identities, histories, and purposes for living. They have a compelling need to function within some conceptual framework of themselves, even if it bears no relationship to reality.

Likewise, a church that isn't growing in their understanding about how God sees them, that hasn't seriously engaged with what the apostles taught the early Church about their identity, that has no sense of being directly connected into God's Narrative of the Church, won't exist somehow without any self-perception. They will function on the basis of assumptions about their identity, but if their perspectives are not being actively shaped by God's cohesive true Story of the past, present and future of the Church, their assumptions will be wrong. The way they see themselves and their purpose for existence will unconsciously be influenced by the categories and stories of the larger culture. They'll distinguish themselves by outward forms: the kind of building they meet in, how they conduct their services, even how they dress...or perhaps they will focus on certain practices or denominational distinctives...or numerous other ways of identifying themselves that at best are secondary or negotiable, and at worst are completely wrong.

On the other hand, individuals and churches that are "learning to see their story embedded in the larger Narrative of the Church" are being equipped to identify themselves correctly. They don't see themselves and their church as

an end in itself...they understand that God has placed them there at that place and time in history to play a role within His overall purposes for the Church. They see the Narrative of the Church as directly relating to who they are and how they should relate to each other and to those who are not yet God's children. They share the most fundamental and important aspects of identity with the early Church as God revealed through the apostles. They are understanding that other distinctives should serve their primary identity as the Building, Body and Bride of Christ.

Some extra questions

To go along with the second question under *Identity*, '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?', we can also ask;

- *Is the shared experience of growing through the teaching of Jesus and His apostles itself forming a part of their identity as a local body of His disciples?*
- *Do they have access to teaching from the New Testament account that clearly shows how the truth given to the early Church also provides them with all the foundational Truth for dealing with their own identity issues?*
- *Do they have a growing sense of who they are and why they exist as a group of God's children in that particular place in ways that tie in with the Church's story, past, present and future?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Narrative of the Church

1. Share anything you care to about your own experience of coming to terms with your identity as a Christian. Would you say that you often tend to think of yourself and your personal story as being connected back to the early days of the Church? Has your experience of engaging with God's Word in the past encouraged this view or not really?
2. When most people in the West think of Christians and the Church, what do you think comes to mind? How have the "stories" of our culture (books, movies, media, internet etc.) played into this perception? In general, what would you say has been the response of the Church to the way it has been characterised by the larger community?



ACTIVITIES

The Narrative of the Church

1. In Acts Chapter 9 find at least four of the ways the early believers are referred to. Share any thoughts you have on each of the names or terms of reference you come across.