

TUTORIAL
7.13

One Body in Christ

This tutorial continues to discuss the area of *Identity*, and looks at the third question in that area: 'Are they growing in their understanding of the bonds that unite them to the global/local Body under Christ as its Head?'

Last time

We drew a parallel between the physiological condition known as *fugue* and the potential for confusion about identity and purpose that can happen for a new believer, as they become new people in Christ.

We remembered how the early Church, trying to understand its place in the past, present and future, were given answers by God's Spirit through the apostles' teaching. This clarified their identity and purpose from God's true perspective.

Individuals and groups of believers today need to see how that Narrative and the Truth it contains is also relevant to them in their own time and place. In fact, they need to see this as *their* story, *their* identity and *their* purpose. It is how they can have a healthy view of where they come from, why they exist now, and where they are going.

The third 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?

In previous tutorials we've touched on the fact that people's cultural story, their *worldview*, has enormous potential for impacting the way they view themselves as individual believers and as a church. This is particularly so for the issues we're considering in this third question under *Identity*: what a church understands unites it, and how they perceive authority. Worldview will also be relevant for the fourth question, which asks how well they avoid the negative aspects of sub-group identities that dog most communities (e.g. gaps related to age, gender, financial and social status, education, family or clan, etc.).

Existing cultural values

AccessTruth Module 4 presents some cultural scales that give us ways of defining some related areas of culture. Here, very briefly, are four that are very relevant to the subject of identity in the church (for fuller explanations see Tutorials 4.7, 4.9 and 4.13).

Note that these kinds of definitions force us to speak in generalities while, in reality, cultures are much more nuanced, with many 'exceptions to the rule'. But there is value in looking for the common threads and considering how, unless submitted to the authority of God's Word, those cultural threads can create inbuilt weaknesses for the church (See *Tutorial 7.8*). Also note that no extreme in any spectrum is inherently healthier or more positive than the other extreme. Only in Jesus Christ Himself do we find a human being who embodied the perfect balance in all areas and was entirely pleasing to the Father.

1. *Individualism vs. Collectivism*:

Individualism: people are focused on themselves and their personal needs; self-sufficiency and self-reliance are highly valued; people identify themselves individually rather than as part of a group.

Collectivism: identities are primarily group related; success of the group ensures the well being of the individual; visible harmony and interdependence are valued; closeness within the group often means distance towards non-group members.

2. *Universalism vs. Particularism*:

Universalism: applies accepted "absolutes" to everyone, regardless of the circumstances of relationships; "fairness" is treating everyone the same; it values looking at a situation "objectively".

Particularism: circumstances, rightfully, change behaviour; there are no absolutes because right and wrong is determined by who you're dealing with - by relationships; exceptions can always be made to rules.

3. *High Power Distance vs. Low Power Distance*:

High Power Distance: accepts the inevitability of inequalities in power and status; power is held close, not shared; distinctions are accentuated, but the powerful are expected to look after subordinates.

Low Power Distance: inequalities in status are considered artificial, just a matter of convenience; distinctions are minimised; initiative is valued and rewarded.

4. *Achieved Status vs. Ascribed Status:*

Achieved Status: positions of influence are reached through accomplishment, rather than family background or connections; status is earned and can be lost through poor performance.

Ascribed Status: prestige is inherent in the person and is difficult to lose; power is often automatic and is related to social class, affiliations or age; titles are important.

Time and space here doesn't allow us to detail the numerous ways that a church can unthinkingly adopt the values of the wider community as far as its sense of identity; but even a brief glimpse at these four sample scales should show that individual and collective cultural assumptions have a huge potential impact.

A church, for example, whose members come from a very *individualistic* society might well struggle to really have a sense of being bonded together as a group. Where *collectivism*, on the other hand, is the cultural norm, church members can value a surface harmony and apparent unity that is not really built on the things that God says actually do tie them together. In a culture that downplays *power distance* and insists that *status must be achieved*, church members may struggle to recognise authority, even an appropriate authority delegated by God's Spirit to gifted individuals. By contrast, in a community where *power distance is high* and *status is ascribed*, church leadership can be very strong, but it may not be established on Biblical authority, instead being assigned according to cultural norms of status, age, family connections, wealth etc.

God's values

The solution to the potential imbalances and weaknesses that can bleed over into the church from its surrounding culture is, of course, to allow God's values to shape our thinking. As the apostle Paul said in his letter to the believers in Rome (Romans 12:2), "Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." The need to be transformed in our thinking is just as relevant to our view of our identity as it is to any other area of life. What's true for us as individuals is also true for the way an entire group sees itself; and specifically this issue we're considering of what actually ties them together, what are the bonds, the "glue" that even makes them a local body? Hopefully we are completely convinced

by now that this transformation comes about through God's Word being communicated clearly, cohesively and in ways that are relevant to previously unexamined areas of worldview, beliefs, values and day-to-day behaviour.

Back in Tutorial 7.11, in the introduction to the whole area of *Identity*, we very briefly considered different kinds of groups. We noted then that there are many different kinds, that *purpose* has a great deal to do with identity, and that the way *boundaries* are viewed is also critical. Another hugely important factor that comes into focus here is *authority* - who or what has the right to define what the group is, how it is distinct, the way it should function and how it should relate to others who are not part of the group?

Take an example. If we think of a nation, a country, as an example of a group, we can define it in a number of ways: by its geographical boundaries, ethnic make-up, cultural features etc. But think how important it is - in terms of the way a country sees itself and is seen by others - *who* actually holds the power to influence and control. In a democracy that power is, at least theoretically, in the hands of the majority who elect representatives to govern them. (Of course that's not the whole story, with the media, financial institutions, lobbyists etc. also exerting significant influence in Western democracies.) And then there are various shades of more authoritarian systems in which a ruling elite or even a single individual holds power. To take some random and widely contrasting examples, consider the impact the issue of authority has on the ways that North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Denmark and Russia respectively see themselves and their place in the world.

But what about *the* Church, or *a* church? Obviously the issue of where authority is seen to be - not only in a theoretical or doctrinal way but also in a very real, practical sense - will have a critical impact on the way that group views itself. Are they, for example, defined and held together by a church constitution? Or a doctrinal statement? A denominational structure? Maybe through the strength and charisma of an individual? None of these are inherently wrong, in fact they can be very helpful for the life of a church, but ultimately it *is* a church group, a body (and part of the universal Body), only because of the Headship of Christ. It exists as an extension of His will, His intent. It was born through His sacrifice. Its true identity is a product of its relationship to Him. Anything else that might contribute to the church's identity has to be subsidiary to this. It can only have validity if it is clarifying and pointing toward Christ as its Head. The influence any individual has within the church is only appropriate if they are leading others to know more of Him and to understand His purposes.

Let's remember that our objective in these Tutorials is to determine how we can best evaluate a situation in which Truth is being shared. So in terms of Identity, what kinds of things would we want to hear in conversations with people? What would encourage us that they are, as this third question says,

“growing in their understanding of the bonds that unite them to the global/local Body under Christ as its Head?” Well, we’d love to hear evidence that the way they see themselves as a group is dominated by a consciousness of Christ as their one Lord, as in Paul’s words to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:4-6). As well as that, we’d be reassured that Truth was being effectively shared with them if they mentioned some of the other things Paul referred to in that same part of his letter...that they are tied together as a body by God’s Spirit, by their shared faith, by their baptism that symbolises their identity with Jesus’ death and resurrection, and by an amazing future they can picture themselves sharing with the rest of His people.

Some extra questions

To go along with the third question in the area of *Identity*, ‘Are they growing in their understanding of the bonds that unite them to the global/local Body under Christ as its Head?’, we can also ask;

- *Are they allowing God’s Word to define the proper basis of their relationships as a group, or are they unknowingly applying the values of the wider culture in the church context?*
- *Is there a sense that anything or anyone’s authority to shape who they are as a church is legitimate if, and only if, it actively recognises Christ as the true Head of the Body?*
- *Whatever other factors might also draw them together, is it ultimately their shared faith, hope and identity in Christ that they see tying them together and defining them as a local church body?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

One Body in Christ

Read the conversation below and then answer the following questions. (The opinions expressed by the fictional characters are their own and don’t necessarily reflect our own.)

1. Make any general comments you care to about Liam’s view of “church”. Try to keep in mind the points we’ve been discussing so far about Identity.
2. Can you identify anything about Liam’s attitudes that might be shaped by the assumptions of his culture? (Note the four cultural scales from the tutorial.)
3. If you had opportunity to share God’s Word with Liam in a regular Bible study, how would you set about trying to

address some of the gaps in his understanding of Identity issues that you might have noticed in his conversation with Andrew?

4. What are your thoughts about Andrew suggesting that Liam and his fiancée try the Bible study in the pub? Explain why you do or don't think it was a good idea for Andrew to suggest that as an alternative to their current church experience.

Andrew: *Hey Liam, I haven't seen you for a while, how are things?*

Liam: *Yeah, good to see you again Andrew. I got a new job and moved out to the northern suburbs.*

Andrew: *I guess that's why our paths haven't crossed at church. You still go there, right?*

Liam: *Actually I don't any more. I must admit, I was a bit sick of it after three years.*

Andrew: *Oh really...like what?*

Liam: *Well, the music and the worship style didn't suit me that much. And I don't know...they seem really into like, doctrine and stuff. Not my thing.*

Andrew: *What about Emma? I thought I saw her at church recently.*

Liam: *Oh, yeah, she sometimes comes with me on Saturday night, but she still often goes over to your church on Sunday mornings. Not sure what we'll do when we get married.*

Andrew: *Okay, well I didn't really hear that you'd left. Was it like...did you mention it to Gary or anything?*

Liam: *The main pastor guy? No, I didn't know him very well. In all the time I was going there I reckon I only spoke to him once or twice. He's from overseas and he doesn't seem into sport or music, so I didn't know what we'd talk about. I did get a call from the church office...apparently someone noticed I hadn't been for over a month. I appreciated them making the effort.*

Andrew: *So where are you going now?*

Liam: *It's a kind of a mega-church offshoot near where I live now. They're right into the music and worship, as you'd expect. They don't make that big a deal about the preaching. But there's a lot of pressure to get involved in outreaches and charity stuff... that kind of bugs me. Guess it's okay. I think they see it as part of their branding.*

Andrew: *Hey, I heard about this group that meets at a pub in the city...I think on Thursday nights. They use the barbecue facilities and then have a Bible*

study one of the rooms. Apparently it's pretty good. Sounds like most of the people aren't really church type Christians. Maybe you'd like it. They've got a website. I'll forward you the link if you want.

Liam: *Okay, cool. Yeah, Emma and I might check it out. Better run. See ya.*

Andrew: *Let's catch up for a coffee again some time. Bye.*