

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.14**

# Viewing others according to truth

This tutorial continues to discuss the area of *Identity*, and looks at the fourth and fifth questions in that area: 'Are they learning to view others according to truth, and rejecting the divisions, biases and tensions that often define the wider society?' and '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?'

## Last time

We considered the potential impact a person's worldview and cultural assumptions have on their view of *Identity*, as individuals and as part of a church body. We identified four relevant aspects of culture - Individualism vs. Collectivism, Universalism vs. Particularism, High vs. Low Power Distance, Achieved vs. Ascribed Status - and briefly considered how assumptions in these areas impact a view of identity and authority. We noted that it is only through believers submitting to the authority of God's Word that their ingrained attitudes can be challenged and aligned to His perspective on these issues...to see with the kind of perspective Paul described to the Ephesians, "...there is one body and one Spirit...one glorious hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

## The fourth 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?

The previous question dealt with an individual or group's *theoretical* grasp of what ties a church together; now we want to deal with some more practical areas related to how much unity (or fragmentation) is being *experienced* within the diversity of a local body. We noted the danger of cultural assumptions shaping the way members of a church perceive their own place, and the place of authority, within a group. We talked about the need for God to transform their thinking, their "mind" in this area.

As we consider this fourth *Identity* question - how different sub-groups within a church relate to each other - it's obvious that this transformative power of God's Word is no less important here as well. The pride and self-obsession of individual human hearts finds its collective expression in the tensions and divisions that plague every country and community. It's only through the careful teaching and application of Truth that a church body can hope to recognise and avoid the inbuilt tensions that can be so destructive.

## **A common identity with Him**

When Paul wrote to the churches in the highland province of Galatia - what is now part of modern day Turkey - he was addressing issues of identity as they wrestled with what it meant to be God's children under the New Covenant. What were the implications for the Jewish and Gentile believers in the congregations? And what were the differences between them? The apostle explains (Galatians 3:26-28) that through faith they've all been so closely associated with Jesus Christ - as represented by baptism - that it's not possible to tell them apart from Him. Their common identity with Him is complete. And so all the other things that they once defined themselves by, and which came between them - things like ethnicity, social status and gender - those have all now become redundant, subsumed into this new identity they share with Christ and with each other.

Of course as we picture a situation in which we might one day share God's Word, or if we're 'taking the pulse' of something already in existence, it's unlikely that we'll come across tensions between Jewish vs. Gentile cultural identities. But there are numerous other potential sources of tension and conflict that build weaknesses into the church, negatively impact its testimony, and can even cause its eventual disintegration. In the face of this reality, Paul told the Ephesian believers that they'd need to learn patience (Ephesians 4:2,3). It wasn't that they wouldn't be likely to notice shortcomings in each other.

The default for human beings is to see themselves as being the bar by which everyone else is judged, with others usually falling well short. This is also true for whatever groupings people use to define themselves: "Those people are not quite as cool, not as smart, not as good as us." Or, "Those people think they're so cool, so smart, so good!" There are an infinite number of ways to

divide and diverge, to segregate and separate. Overcoming those defaults, Paul tells the Ephesians that it is going to take work, real effort... they have to remember that their natural view of other people and sub-groups within the church as separate and, no doubt, inferior to themselves, is a faulty view. The reality is they are united by God's Spirit who lives in each of them, who *indwells* the whole Body of Christ. So they have to put effort into eliminating perspectives that divide and create tensions, instead focusing on the fundamental truths about who they are that bring genuine harmony.

What might we find to indicate a church is *not* applying Truth in these areas of identity? Of course we should never expect to find perfect harmony, but what would suggest the presence of a serious fragmentation between different sub-groups in the church that is likely to inhibit growth and fruit? We might find a strong sense of separation between the young and the old, for example. Or perhaps the men are domineering and dismissive of the important contribution women can make in the life and outreach of the church. Is there a feeling of conflict in the air, of agendas being pushed, or even just an indifferent ignorance about the daily experiences of others? Is the health and growth of the church seen to be the concern of just a few? In certain cultural settings we might find fracture lines that follow family or clan lines. Maybe church members are lining up behind different charismatic leaders ("I'm of Paul." "I'm of Apollos."). Are people playing politics, lobbying for their special interests, getting together to criticise leaders, using social media to fuel divisions?

Sadly the list of negative factors that can fracture a church is endless, but the solution is always the same; believers having opportunity to respond to God's Spirit as Truth is applied coherently and consistently within the reality of their lives. And a critically important theme that has to keep emerging from God's Word, His Narrative, is who *He says* they are - as individuals and as a group - against the backdrop of who He always is.

A final point about this issue of how much the "divisions, biases and tensions" of the larger community are replicated in the church: in a situation where Truth is being shared in a community with the goal of seeing a new fellowship established, the approach of the church planters themselves can have long lasting and widespread implications.

A great deal, in fact, always rests on how much those who are sharing God's Word have allowed Him to shape their own sense of identity. This plays out in real willingness, commitments and even courage in building relationships. If they are only prepared to pursue meaningful connections with people who they feel comfortable with - those of a similar age, who share the same interests, who are not intimidating, etc. - then in all likelihood the church-to-be will have inbuilt limitations. A church that starts with people drawn mainly from one age bracket, ethnic sub-group, socio-economic class, or even gender, *can* grow past that stage and eventually have a congregation that more fairly

represents wider demographics. But the more different kinds of people make up a church from the outset, the better placed it will be to attract others and be the vital witness God intends it to be in the community.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the fourth question under *Identity*, 'Are they learning to view others according to truth, and rejecting the divisions, biases and tensions that often define the wider society?', we can also ask:

- *Are they increasingly less concerned about perceived differences with brothers and sisters from other cultural sub-groups, instead learning to focus on the more fundamental common identity they have as members of Christ's body?*
- *Are they learning to value diversity within the body, respecting and appreciating the role of others regardless of gender, age, education, social status, wealth, etc.?*
- *Are they committed to reaching out to everyone, regardless of any ingrained prejudices in the society, so that people from all the different levels and sub-groups have access to God's Word and to the life of the church?*

## The fifth 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?

God's intention for Israel as a people was always clear. He told Abraham that he'd be the father of a nation *through which all other nations would be blessed* (Genesis 12:3). Later, laying out for Moses the terms of the Covenant that defined Israel as His people, He said that through them He'd demonstrate His power to the surrounding nations (Exodus 34:10). They were intended to be His witnesses (Isaiah 43:10). To demonstrate the incredible blessing of having access to God's Word (Deuteronomy 4:6,33). Even though they failed many times to be what God intended, this role of being a light and a witness, of being the means of God's communication and blessing to others...this was built

into their DNA. It was who they were as a people, whether they recognised it or not.

We've talked before about *purpose* having very close links to *identity*. In terms of identity/purpose, what was true for God's people under the First Covenant is also true for those defined by the Second. But God's outreach role for this new people would be even clearer, wider in scope, and carrying more authority than was the case for Israel. The Founder of this Group was, Himself, *the Word*, God's Revelation in human form. The men He chose, equipped and commissioned to continue building the church were apostles, *sent-out ones*. The mandate they received directly from Him, and that they'd pass on to others, was to *go out*, to be His *witnesses everywhere*. The pattern He described was of His people moving out with Truth from an initial local base in ever-widening circles.

From its inauguration on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, God's Spirit empowered the fledgling Church to move out like that, certainly geographically but also across boundaries of prejudice, worldview, ethnicity and even language. The Narrative of the early Church in the centuries that followed was one of expansion, of taking God's Truth into new areas, of being exactly *who* He said it was. It was not without an enormous cost being paid by the obedient ones; because being identified with the One who gave Himself as a sacrifice, means being a sacrifice yourself. And not without problems and failures, regular losses of focus and confusion about the purpose, and enormous struggles to keep the integrity of the Truth. But despite that, God's Spirit has continued to use His Word and those He's raised up over the last 2000 years to remind His Church who it is and why it exists in the world. (By the way, it should be clear that we're not talking about the geopolitical power-seeking of any man-made institution that wrongly calls itself *The Church* here, but rather the Body of Christ that has stayed true to the Gospel of His Grace as the apostles recorded it, and as it has been passed on from one generation of His children to the next.)

That purpose-linked identity of the *universal* Church, the *Ecclesia*, is also true of *local* gatherings of His people. Just as the concept of being witnesses and ambassadors; of having an innate purpose beyond itself as a group; of being people who looked by faith for something greater and further on...in the same way that was essential to the founding of the Church back then, it should also resonate as a consistent theme whenever there's opportunity to share God's Narrative with any individual or group today. In the second question under *Identity* we focused on the need for people to see their story embedded in the larger Narrative of the Church. When this happens, a direct link is forged between their own emerging identity and the formative experience of the early Church as it came to terms with who it was in light of its mission.

## Living out our identity

Our fifth *Identity* question, however, is focused not only on an individual or group's sense of purpose-in-identity, but also about how *appropriately* they are living that out. Do they know - or are they learning - not only that they *are* disciple witnesses, but also *how* to be relevant in that role? What does it mean, for example, to be a representative of Jesus in a society where there's a church on every corner and most people call themselves Christians? How can you live out your true identity as a Christian if you're a student in an aggressively secular, pluralistic academic setting? How can you be a courageous witness for the Lord when your family and friends believe you're a traitor to your religion and country? Is it even possible to be an authentic believer in a cut-throat corporate business environment? In practical terms, how can you be a light when you and everyone else in the community are desperately poor and barely able to find enough to eat? How can you be a relevant Christian on social media without making everyone you know "*unfriend*" or "*unfollow*" you? What does it look like to be a disciple of Christ at sea for weeks at a time on a fishing trawler?

These are the kinds of questions that followers of Christ should be wrestling with and finding answers for in God's Word. Not that there are any simple formulas to follow. But if Truth is being shared effectively with anyone, then by definition it is not only clarifying in a theoretical or "doctrinal" sense *who* they are in their new life, but it is also equipping them to live out that identity in the reality of their daily situations.

And what's true for individuals is also true for a group of God's children. Whether it's a new church or one that has been around for decades, they should be continuing to grow "in their understanding of how to appropriately represent the Lord" in their community. They should learn to ask, and find answers from God's Word to, questions like these: *If it's true, as we're realising, that Christ has intentionally drawn us together as a group of His disciples/witnesses here, what does that mean in real terms? What are the implications for where we should meet together and when? We know that there's every chance that people will have assumptions about us based on their previous experiences with "religion" and "church": so what - if anything - should we do about that? How should we be trying to present ourselves in the community? What should be our relationship with the local authorities, with institutions, with other churches? What should feature on our website as our online face? And so on...*

So we could say that as a person or church comes to understand who they are *in Christ* and *in His Body*, they are also learning who they are *in the world*. And the borders of that "world" should continue to grow. Initially, as a new believer or church glimpses what it truly means to be a witness of Jesus, many are concerned - and rightly so - with their immediate family, friends, neighbourhood and community. Gradually though, they should begin to look out from that sphere of contact with a widening view. God loves the *world*. He

is certainly concerned for those closest to us, but He is equally concerned for His entire harvest field. He wants everyone to have the opportunity to turn to Him in faith. So a growing clarity about what it means to be His servants, individually and corporately, means an increasingly global view of what that service entails.

If we find ourselves needing to assess a strategy for sharing God's Word that someone is proposing, or if we're picturing our own future contribution, perhaps evaluating progress of a situation we're currently involved in, or if we're wanting to gauge the health of a church no matter how new or old...we should be looking for an outward trajectory. Is it resulting in them knowing how to represent the Lord where they currently are and then into broader contexts as He leads?

## Some extra questions

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

- *As they engage with Truth, are they understanding God's intention for them to live out their identities as His witnesses to their families, friends and community?*
- *Are they wrestling with the practical realities of what it means to be relevant representatives of Christ in their particular contexts?*
- *Is their growing understanding of being God's servants resulting in an expanding view of "the world" and the role they can play in giving others access to the Gospel?*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Viewing others according to truth*

1. In your own cultural context, what are some of the existing social or cultural pressures that may potentially have a divisive influence on a local body of believers? Can you think of some of these things that divide people in the wider society that may be inadvertently carried into the church?
2. Have you seen examples of a local church making a concerted and planned effort to overcome barriers in order to reach into their community or to integrate differing groups into their fellowship (e.g., moving beyond their

‘comfort zone’, making an effort to communicate in relevant ways, learning language, understanding culture, reaching into the community, etc.)?

3. How much of a balance do you feel the local church should have on “outreach” (ministry to reach unbelievers in their own or other communities) as opposed to “in-church programs” (ministries to the existing church body of believers)? What percentage of church resources - time, personnel, finances, etc. - do you think should be designated to either area? Why?