

**TUTORIAL**  
**9.8**

# 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?'

1 Peter 2:9-10: But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people.

God created Adam in His own image. We see in this verse the idea of being image bearers, like Adam. And that's also God's intent for us, that we would bear the image of Christ, and that He would be our all in all; that He would be our identity. It says that we were not a people before we knew Him, but now He has made us His own people, His own family. Once we had no identity; we weren't anyone. But now because of Him, we are someone. Our identity as God's people is not because of ourselves but because of Him.

## Last time

We looked at the fifth question from the WILD outline—the last in the area relating to God's Word. You'll remember it related to how people use God's Word to feed themselves spiritually, to correct wrong thinking and to reach out to others. In this tutorial we will discuss the first question in the WILD outline in the area of Identity.

### **Are they increasingly clear about - and able to articulate - their true identity from God's perspective?**

Phil explains the two main factors in the people group's sense of traditional identity: Islam and the Clan.

In my mind, identity had to do with Islam, being Muslim. That's what distinguished them from the neighbouring people groups. And so when they would trace their identity, they would be looking back towards the Arabs that came down and colonised this area a thousand years ago. There were Arabs coming here to trade before the Arabs were Muslim.

Being the last people group that's Muslim means they're surrounded by non-Muslim people groups. Islam, for them, is a huge part of their identity. I think it was Rick Love who has, in one of his books, this matrix: high identity/high practise, high identity/low practise, low identity/low practise. So, these guys are definitely high identity/low practise. That would be one of the things I would say that makes up their identity as a corporate people group. What separates them from somebody else is generally based on being Muslim.

The other primary thing after that is what clan line you belong to. That's where you get your prestige from, and that's where you get your sense of in-group belongingness from, depending on which clan you belong to. The clan then separates you by specifying who's in, who's out, who's related, who's not related, who's part of our joking clan relationship, who's not part of our joking clan relationship. It prescribes how you call people, what you call them, who you call them, the titles that you use, and the relationships that you can have with people. It's all based on your clan. I would say that's probably the two highest factors in identity.

Phil describes how the church planting team, coming from outside, were careful to distance themselves from unhelpful labels and forms of identity:

Right from day one, we came in and said, "We're here to teach you God's Word," while trying to separate ourselves from a particular identity like a church. In their case, they wanted to know, "Which church do you belong to?" And what was a relief to them was for us to say, "We're here not in the name of somebody in particular, like some particular group." For us, it's a distinction. Maybe it's a fairly fine distinction, but we would say, "Because we don't belong to one particular group, we're not sent by a denomination to build the kingdom of that denomination. I'm not here obligated to plant Baptist churches or plant Methodist churches, or plant whatever type of churches. I'm here to build God's kingdom, and that's my primary goal."

In that sense, it's like we came saying, "We're not here to build a church. We're not here to paint the name on it that says, 'This is the church of such-and-such a group, and everybody needs to leave their other groups and join this group, because this group is the only one that has the truth.' We're here to sit under a tree. It's for everybody. It's for Muslims, it's for Catholics, it's for whoever. We're here for absolutely everybody." And so we displayed that type of openness in terms of identity of who we were, and they're like, "Well, c'mon, you've got a group. You've got a group." And we're like, "You know what? We do have a group; being part of a group is something that human beings do. But we're not here to bring you that group. We're here to talk to you about who God is." And so, even though we belong to a group...I have a home church that's of one denomination, my wife belongs to a church

that's a different denomination and our church planting partners are part of a church that's a totally different denomination. So we're saying to these guys, "We belong to different groups, but you're never going to hear us say the name of our group, because that's not what we're here for."

Phil explains that the church planting team positioned themselves as religious teachers in the community by the way they described themselves and lived:

In terms of our personal identity and how we presented ourselves to people, we tried hard to, again, not be associated with any particular group. We tried hard to work like this, "We're here because we follow God. We've heard His Word, we've understood it, and we sense this responsibility to tell other people what God says to all of us as His people." So as we were coming into this community, our own identity-building process is this gradual thing that takes place. First we're seen coming in with cars and generators, and we're put in a category of rich foreigner. What we're working towards is becoming known as people who, first of all, walk uprightly in terms of the local way of understanding walking uprightly and that we're people qualified to talk about our religious topics. We know about it, we have conversations about it constantly with people, and so there's a sense of authority that we know what we're talking about, and we can actually enter into these conversations.

Even in the Islamic side, for me personally, having read lots and lots of the history, you're driving down the road and you're turning to your Muslim guys and you're like, "Do you know who Hamsa was in relation to the prophet and how he worked with the prophet to protect him, and also to give him authority and to give him prestige? Because Hamsa, there was a supporter behind him." And they're like, "How do you know this stuff about Hamsa if you're not Muslim?"

And if there's a question about Catholicism, we're answering why things happen the way they do. So, by lots and lots of different conversations in the realm of religion, we're building the sense that we understand quite a bit of what God's Word says and what the history is, and how all these different religions tie together. So we're building this identity along the way of, I guess you'd call it, authority in religious topics, while trying to maintain a sense of independence about it without committing to one side or the other. If we're going to commit to anything, we're going to commit to who God is and what He says, and that's what we're trying to follow.

For instance, going to a mosque and praying says, "I'm here with you guys, you're my neighbours and I'm trying to understand how you guys live. I'm here to understand, to be a learner in this process." And so

they're saying, "Well, you're not a Muslim." And I'll even, when I'm going in there, say to them, "Is it okay if I, as a non-Muslim, come into the mosque and sit and watch and see what's happening?" And then they wanted me to pray with them during that. They're like, "You need to come pray, too." And I'm thinking I don't want to create a scene here. So the question I asked them at that point was, "Is it okay for you if a non-Muslim prays?" There are people who believe that a non-Muslim's prayer voids the whole prayer for everybody. So I'm saying to them, "I don't mind praying, but are you guys okay with me being there? Because as a non-Muslim, I'll be voiding your efforts." And they're like, "Oh, no, don't worry about that." So there's things like that, where we're all trying to maintain a sense of independence and yet highly religious identity. That's what we were shooting for in that process as teachers.

Phil describes how they took on the community's identity markers to place themselves in the role of someone who could teach:

The identity that we set up for them right from day one when we first came is, "We're here to teach you God's Word. We're here to translate it into your language and teach you what it means, and what it says." So, their first introduction to us in the community was us putting ourselves in a religious teacher category. There's a lot of things that we're trying to do where we recognise young guys can get away with certain stuff, but guys in a religious teaching category in this culture need to act a certain way. They need to wear long pants, they need to typically have a beard. There're certain things that are associated, not that everybody does it, but that's associated with a certain role in the community, and we, to the extent that we can, match that role and those identity markers of that role.

Phil talks about how their refusal to align themselves to any religious identity has paved the way for the believers to do the same as they reach out to other local communities:

So there's that sense that came into it for us, to be able to sit down with these guys from the very beginning and say, "We're not here on one side or another side of this question. Are we Catholic? Are we Muslim? We're not Catholic, we're not Muslim. We're here to tell people about who God is." And so that sense of openness opened the door for us from the beginning and has continued to play an important role. When the guys are going to a new area, it's that feature that they highlight when they explain to people what it is we're here to do. We're here to talk about God and who He is. We're not here to build groups, we're not here to pitch one side against the other side. We're just here to talk about any group that there is.

And through the teaching process, the identity feature comes in even for me as a teacher. My team member, Francois, and I would often have

this discussion where we're like, "It's not our job to wag our finger at them and say, 'You guys have the wrong truth, and you need to believe what we teach.'" If we were going to come down hard on one particular religion or another in a particular illustration, we would try to come down hard on all religions. Basically, we're trying to say, "We all have the same sickness. It's not you Catholics or you Muslims that are any worse off than anybody else. Here's what they do in my country that's not right. Here's what they do over here that's not right. We're here, we see you guys, we see things that are not right, but it's the same problem that all of us have and we're all, as God's children, as His people that He's created, in front of Him with the same issue."

And so, even in our own identity and in talking to the group, it wasn't, "Your group has bad doctrine. You need to take our group's doctrine." Instead it's, "We as human beings have this problem before God, all of us. My country, your country, we've all got the same problem. What's God saying to us that deals with it?" So it's that sense of us bringing ourselves in line with them and saying, "This is a problem that we collectively have as people." That identity we had I think was huge in the teaching. That was something that opened the teaching up for everybody, because it wasn't finger wagging.

**Are they having their assumptions about who they are challenged and shaped by God's Word as it shows them who He is, how He sees needy human beings, and the implications of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross?**

John worked with a group whose traditional taboos made them fearful of any connection with believers. They came to understand their true identity in Christ:

So, here we had a situation now where this group who were scared stiff of the church were now a part of the body of Christ themselves. And we explained that to them: that now, they were God's children. Now, everything was changed. And I think we went back over Phase One (the Bible message from Creation to Christ) again for them, the initial foundational teaching, just to really make sure that they understood it, and then we went back through that material, but from the perspective of them now being in Christ. This was to give them an understanding of their new identity, that now, no longer did they belong to Satan. They belonged to God. No longer were they shut out, but now they're shut in in Christ and safe in Him.

Clark explains how the people group's low esteem created obstacles to a correct understanding for the church:

They were the bottom of the social structure in our area. They didn't have much of a tribal identity or an ethnic identity as a people, and I

would refer to them as chameleons sometimes. They would blend into whatever community they were in, so they didn't have a strong identity as themselves.

Again, they don't want to be singled out, so we find even as we go to town with them that they're not wanting to be identified with the foreigner as such. They don't want that scrutiny on them. They're very independent and individualistic. They don't play well with others, and they're happiest when they're in the jungle by themselves hunting or doing things like that. I don't know if that's speaking to identity, necessarily, but they didn't have much of an identity as a people group.

They would find their identity in becoming Thai, or like the Thai nationals. So then you see Buddhism becoming a part of their identity that they're reaching for in order to be accepted in larger Thai society. That would've been some of the tension there that was going on when we moved in. I think as God's Word entered into their society, the main thrust in that was this desire to get ahead, to be better off. That was driving a lot of their initial movement towards God's Word. And I think now as we've gotten into Romans and some of the other epistles, they're starting to see that identity change to actually grasping and understanding that they're now God's children, and what that means to them.

Phil explains that even when someone is convinced of the truth, it is sometimes identity issues that keep them from faith.

You'll get a lot of guys that say, "I hear what you're teaching. What you're teaching is true. What you're teaching is better than what I believe. It's truer than what I believe. I just can't believe it. I've got this or the other tie that keeps me from actually committing, even though I'm willing to acknowledge that in every way, what you're teaching is superior." And so, we're looking at that and going, there's something identity-wise for that person that's keeping him from it, even though all of his senses or all of his rationale tell him that what we're teaching is better and truer. So what is that? And we're trying to look and talk as believers to say, "What is it that we can do? How is it that we can trust the Lord to tip the scale and get them over into the side where it's, "Why don't I just act on this and not just not act on it?"

**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?**

Phil describes how faith in Jesus, in contrast to any religious system, has become a primary distinction of the believers' identity:

So, where is this at with God? We're saying we trust Him, but in our back pocket, we've got kind of this backdoor openness kind of thing where we can get out of this, and we actually trust a few other things. And so, we're trying to work with them through this thing saying, "God's intent for us is total commitment and total rest in His sufficiency and what He's done on the cross." So we're seeing guys as they understand that, as they hear that, where in their conversations, their prayers, and their discussions and the teaching, there's this growing sense of, "We're people who trust only in what God did through Christ." And I think it was always there for a lot of those guys, that they really did only trust this and they realised this right from the beginning. As a corporate identity, they are saying, "And that's what distinguishes us from the people around us, because the people around us are trusting in what they've done. And we're trusting in what Christ has done for us. It's not what we bring to the table in terms of, 'Here, God, accept me for this reason.' We're coming empty-handed and saying, 'It's what Christ has done for us.'"

And so, as that identity continues to grow and as people keep reinforcing, "This is what makes us distinct, this total dependence on what somebody else has done for us as opposed to what we've done for that person," that's what makes us distinct. Because there's a lot of people, such as the Catholics, who love Jesus and they're talking about Jesus and they've got crosses everywhere, and they don't have a problem with you talking about Jesus. But the guys are beginning to recognise, even though these guys over here talk about Jesus, what makes us distinct from them is that we're not trusting what we do; we're trusting what He did for us, and that exclusively. And that's what makes it clear, even for the Muslims, who are looking at us and wondering how are we different from the Catholics. Everybody's talking about Jesus. But what makes the believers distinct is that the Jesus that they're trusting is only Jesus. It's not the church, it's not the system, it's not the works, it's not the Hail Marys. It's not the going to mass, it's not the being baptised. They're throwing Jesus in with all of that, whereas we're saying, "It's just Jesus, and what He's done."

Gebi talks about the fact that their identity in Christ is not just when they are gathered together but when they are in other places too:

I am going to talk about when we go out to town and interact with those who don't know Christ. The thing that we are convinced about now is that even when we are out there, we are still connected to the body of Christ. Even though we are individuals, we have this clear picture that we are part of His body wherever we are, in town or wherever.

**Are they realizing 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?**

Greg talks about how an identity grew for the church in an already rejected subculture:

When you're in a society like that for the deaf guys, there was no community. Their community was the deaf. As a deaf community, they united together. When they became believers, when there was a chance for them to understand God's Word, one of the ways we began is with just a foundational study together where we taught the Word of God together, where people sat around in a room where we discussed who God was, how God saw them, and then how God described the world around them. And so, as a process, they began to understand their responsibility and their need to begin reaching out to the world with this message of truth that had been given to them.

So, as we gathered together in this group and they began to form this connection and identity of who they were, they realised there was a growing sense of them becoming believers, and they were being strongly rejected by the community around them. That began to help them understand and, in a way, to identify a little with who Jesus was and this idea of being rejected by men more and more. They began to form this close connection with each other that their life was seen through the body, that their hope was seen through each other, they were building relationships there. And then there was this desire to be able to reach out to the community around them.

It was the same thing for the other people group we worked with when they began building relationships there. To be in that people group was to be Buddhist, and for them to come to Jesus Christ and to have an identity now in Christ meant they were seen by most of the community as rejecting the Buddhist community. They're rejecting the entire community around them. And for many of them, even though they were from maybe wealthy families, maybe highly educated families, their families then denied them or rejected them and kicked them out.

For these people, because of the fact that their identity meant if you're a part of that people group, then you're a Buddhist. And for them to now come to Jesus Christ, that meant a massive upheaval in family. That meant a massive upheaval with friends, even with jobs and businesses. And for many of the believers, they had never expected that. They didn't understand it at first, but then they began



to grow in the understanding of what that meant now to follow Jesus Christ. But the bond of the church became really strong, and the family became very strong, and this idea that we will provide, that we're the family.

We asked Dave, "What are the primary areas of identity originally and how has that changed since a church has been planted there?"

When we first moved in among the people, they had a strong sense of identity on various levels; the identity as a family, identity as a clan, identity as a village and identity as a language group in contrast with other language groups around them. There were serious obligations and expectations that went along with each of these identities. For example, if someone that you would call "brother" or would consider to be your "brother" asked you for something, it would be very, very difficult to say no. It's a little bit broader than the term "brother" for us. If they are in trouble, if they need help with something, you come to their aid, you stick up for them, sometimes even if it's pretty clear that they are in the wrong. You are going to side with these close relatives against the people that might be opposing them or accusing them, because that's what is expected.

The same thing happens on the village level. There were times where it's almost as if our village was kind of at war with one of the neighbouring villages. This was early on when we were still learning the language and culture, before a church was planted. And there was a strong sense of loyalty within this village against the other villages, and then when it came to other language groups, there was a lot of fear and suspicion when you would get outside of their own language group, to the point where they were pretty sure if you would venture very deep into these other language groups, you were very, very susceptible to being killed by sorcery.

Well, it's been exciting to see these previous identities break down to where they understand right and wrong as the Bible establishes it, to where they would stand on the side of right, rather than just standing on the side of their "brother" or close relative. Also, as for these suspicions and fears that went into the other language groups, they found a oneness, a comradery, with many people in these other language groups because of Christ, because of their identity in Christ. At one time, there in our home village, we actually had a conference of believers, and there were people attending that conference from 10 different language groups. That would've been unheard of in the past. Many of the people with whom they now enjoy Christian fellowship are the children and grandchildren of the archenemies of their parents and grandparents.

Clark describes the journey for the believers toward a greater understanding of their identity in Christ:

They grasped the idea of God the Creator. They have a very vague concept of an Owner, of a Creator, but it's very, very vague. So when we taught initially, that was what they grasped, that God was the Creator. He was all-powerful, then they would acknowledge Christ, but that wasn't who they talked about. For years, you heard about the Creator, the Owner. That was their emphasis that they talked about.

But now and again, I think a lot of this has been because of the translation and stuff, and we've taught through Phase One and Phase Two several times, and we're starting to see that shift that now, they're starting to talk more and more about Jesus and His salvation, what He's done for them, and now being in Him. That's becoming more and more a focus of their conversation.

Phil explains that part of the believers' shared identity is their experience of God's Word and their complete dependence on Him:

In their discussions with each other, one of the things that they call themselves is "the people of the trunk". We had used this illustration previously to say these are people who believe in the first three books and not in the Quran or the traditions of the church. These are guys that trust the Taurat, Zabur and Injil. So, they're calling themselves "people of the trunk" as one way of distinguishing themselves from other religious identities around.

The other thing that they're constantly saying is, "We're the people who believe in what He's done for us, not what we do for Him." They see that identity growing and becoming stronger as they discuss it amongst themselves, trying to differentiate, trying to wrap their heads around it. The negative side of what we've done, in terms of being un-associated with any one group or another, has been a sense of confusion about, "So what is it exactly?" Because people want a label to slap on it, to say, "This is what it is." So they've had to kind of develop and create this label, based on what we've been saying, what we've been emphasising. So when they're saying the believers' group, you'll see them stop from time to time and say, "What that means is this: we trust in what God's done for us. We're not trying to do stuff to earn and please God by our own efforts. We're trusting what He's done for us."

And so, "group of believers" is a fairly generic label, even in this community. But they're trying to work towards this identity thing of what they're saying. So, they call themselves the believers' group,

but what does that mean? Then they add this qualifier to it. When I'm looking at the W.I.L.D questions, I'm looking at identity. The thing that we're looking for and shooting for is the centrality of Christ becoming more and more central and becoming more and more all-encompassing, and all-satisfactory for whatever problem might be out there; that He is the answer to all of that, and there isn't any other answer.

In this tutorial we saw that God's intention is for all believers to lose all other identities besides Him. All of us have competing identities. God is wanting to strip all of those other identities away from us so that our identity would be solely Him. Are we in Him or not? Because that's all there really is. There are just the two groups, and that's how we need to see it, and that's how those that we're discipling need to see it too.

As Christians, we need to be cautious of creating some other label for believers that would become the thing they rely on, whether it's a specific organization or some denomination, that would get in the way of a true understanding of who they are from God's perspective.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Understanding true identity*

1. What are some aspects of your own identity that you think could be; a) potential strengths, or b) potential challenges, to you being able to share God's Word effectively in a new community?
2. What are some aspects of your own identity that you think could be; a) potential strengths, or b) potential challenges, to you being able to share God's Word effectively in a new community?
3. Picture this scenario: After moving into a minority people group, you find there is a denominationally aligned church in a nearby town. It becomes clear that they exclusively use the national language Bible and are very tied to Western forms of worship. How do you think you might relate to this group, and how would you describe your relationship to them in the community?



## **ACTIVITIES**

### *Understanding true identity*

1. Research any churches in your home area that have a distinct ethnic or national identity. Find out what languages they use, denominations they represent, etc. Share your thoughts on the advantages or possible pitfalls of churches having ethnicity as part of their identity.