

William Edgar

WHO ARE YOU?

**Answering questions about
You, Me and God**

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Dedication

To Peter and Sandra Moore,
with deepest gratitude.

Who am I?

AN IDENTITY WOULD SEEM TO BE ARRIVED AT BY THE WAY IN WHICH
THE PERSON FACES AND USES HIS EXPERIENCE.

(JAMES BALDWIN)

When I was a teenager, as it was for most young people my age, very few things were settled. Oh, I had a solid and loving family. My parents had endured the Great Depression and World War II, and communicated the value of hard work and respect for Western civilization to my brother and me. I was sent away to boarding school, which was the tradition in our family. The curriculum was quite standard, having been shaped by decades of commitment to the importance for any educated person of mathematics, literature, history, and the like. Sports were stressed a good deal, which suited me well, as I was a decent athlete and enjoyed the exertion and

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the competition. There was obligatory chapel, which most of us endured without much personal faith. The school was called a preparatory school, as the basic goal for every student was getting admitted to college (as Americans call university).

In that way everything was, more or less, preset. If we didn't study hard enough, we were threatened with not going to college. If we excelled on the athletic field we might be recruited by one of these colleges to play on their teams, which in America meant a good deal. At the same time, for me, something was missing. Was getting into college such a cure-all? Was that all there was to life? When I asked my parents or some of the teachers (called 'masters') why we were doing all this, remarkably little substance was offered, at least in my judgment. They talked vaguely about being prepared for life, whatever that meant.

I was really searching. With a couple of friends, I began to read the Existentialists. Albert Camus was my favorite. Although he was pessimistic, in a number of ways, he had a profound sense of the worth and dignity of every human being. Above all he cared about justice, something I cared about more and more at my young age. When I did arrive

in college I studied as much French literature as I could, as well as other guides in the quest for justice.

I might not have put it quite this way at the time, but I was really trying to find out who I was. Under the guidance of a kindly university instructor, and a number of other influences, I did find out. I discovered the Christian faith. Today, I would say, it discovered me! On the following pages I wish to introduce the reader to some of the ways my new-found identity has given meaning to several of my inquiries, including my quest for justice. I want to respond to the many questions I have either had for myself or received from others about the Christian religion. But first, a few thoughts about the issue of identity.

You may know that the Christian faith has played a large part in shaping our Western idea of who the human person is. It took a while, but over the centuries, a truly Christian understanding of the nature of human beings replaced both ancient Greek and pagan notions. Particularly from the Protestant Reformation onward, human identity was considered to be who we are before God himself. To put it in biblical language, we are made after God's own image. What this means is that each person, you

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and I, have our primary identity as godlike beings, capable of loving, thinking, working, and worshipping.

This has all kinds of implications. Today we take it for granted that we may choose our profession, choose our spouse, and choose to live in a certain place. There was a time when all of those were fixed. Children took over the family business, their marriages were arranged, and it was rare to move away from where one had grown up. Because of the impact of the Christian faith it gradually occurred to people that their identity was more than in their social group or their lot in life. It was in their primary relationship to God. The much maligned group, known as the Puritans, helped us refine this understanding by emphasizing human calling before God. As some of them used to put it, their life was lived first and foremost before an 'audience of one,' namely, God. What a contrast to what we experience today when so much of life is based on performance, or achievement, and this before several audiences, such as parents, teachers, or even the celebrities we try to emulate. There is a place for some of that, but the great breakthrough in the Christian faith is its focus on the primary, vertical relationship with the Lord God.

The Sovereign Self

FOR YOU HAVE DIED, AND YOUR LIFE IS HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD. WHEN CHRIST WHO IS YOUR LIFE APPEARS, THEN YOU ALSO WILL APPEAR WITH HIM IN GLORY (COLOSSIANS 3:3-4).

The pendulum swung to the other side. But has it not swung too far? Today the individual is considered sovereign, and the vertical relationship has been eclipsed. Indeed, instead of the audience of one, the entire audience is now the self. We have moved from being godlike to behaving as though we were gods. One hears it in popular speech. 'You owe it to yourself,' 'take control of your finances,' 'you need a good self-image.' Recently, my wife and I have attended several graduation ceremonies. The typical message from speakers and administrators is similar: 'be honest to yourself,' 'follow your heart,' 'listen to your inner child,' and the like. The problem with this approach is that it sounds marvelous, until you realize it cannot be done.

When I was a Sixth Former (12th grader) about to graduate, if someone had told me to follow my dreams it would have sounded lovely, until it would dawn on me that my dreams were not coherent. I had no idea what I wanted to be or do. I had this vague sense that I cared about justice, but the idea had no foundation. Consequently, I had

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no foundation upon which to construct meaningful decisions. Of course, I had many interests, including football (soccer), French literature, music, and so forth. Indeed, I decided to read music at university. But at the deepest level, I really had no idea who I was. In the more traditional societies, there was a fairly low bar. Your future might have been confining, but it wasn't hard to decide what you were going to do. However, today we have affirmed the sovereign self. Despite all the talk of following your heart, very few people know what their heart is telling them. The sovereign self is simply incapable of giving guidance.

One place the pressure is coming from, ironically, is identity politics. That is, we define who we are quite narrowly, in terms of an ideology. Perhaps we are liberal. Or conservative. Perhaps we have same-sex attraction. Maybe we are heterosexual. What popular culture tells us is to follow those impulses, because they tell us who we are. But do they? Important as it is within a proper context, do we really want to affirm that our sexual preference is the key to who we are? A friend of mine recently had a conversation with a relative who is a lesbian. She announced to him that he couldn't love her because he denied her basic identity. My friend tried to explain that he did love her, first, because she was family, and second,

simply because she was made after God's image. He disagrees with her sexual orientation and yet he still loves her as a sister. He tried to persuade her that her basic identity was not her sexual orientation but her being one of God's creatures. Then the idea came to him. He asked her if she loved him. In fact, she did and was glad to say so. Well, then, he told her, 'I know you disagree with my Christian faith. I claim my identity to be in Jesus Christ. But that doesn't stop you from loving me. Can't I also love you without embracing your sexual orientation?' That gave her great pause.

My Career

FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST AND TO DIE IS GAIN (PHILIPPIANS 1:21).

One of the most common views of identity today is getting the right job. Years ago, my wife and I were moving our daughter into her dormitory room at university. There we met her new roommates. I well remember the conversation I had with one young woman. I asked what her aspirations were. Without hesitation she replied, to get into a good graduate school so I can qualify for a good job, then everything else should work out fine. I did not want to lecture her, and I partly approved her serious motivations. But I eventually tried to encourage her

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to look at the bigger picture. Why not enjoy these four unique years with so many resources at your disposal? Don't you know how many people have jobs and are not satisfied? Today, several years later, job retention is famously elusive to young people. In North America, the average university graduate changes work at least six times in the first decade. It is even considered a weakness to stay too long in one place. It's a two-way street, since many companies make few attempts to retain their younger employees.

Not only lack of commitment on both sides, but also disillusionment strikes hard. Many employees begin with great enthusiasm but soon find problems at work. They may have difficulty with a superior. They may be disappointed in the culture of the workplace. They may end the day simply unfulfilled. Of course, these are real problems, and many places of employment, indeed most, are far from perfect. But if your primary identity is the job, disenchantment lurks at the door.

Now, if your primary identity is from the audience of one, then you can have the best of both worlds. First, when you know God loves you and has made you after his own image in order that you may know him and walk with him, then your identity is

unshakable. Second, then everything else can fall into place, the job, your family, your social status, your money ... Here is a prayer I say every Monday morning before I go out to work. Notice it is both deeply meaningful and deeply realistic:

O God, at whose word man goeth forth to his work and to his labor until the evening; Be merciful to all whose duties are difficult or burdensome, and comfort them concerning their toil. Shield from bodily accident and harm the workmen at their work. Protect their efforts of sober and honest industry and suffer not the hire of laborers to be kept back by fraud. Incline the heart of employers and of those whom they employ to mutual forbearance, fairness and good-will. Give the spirit of governance and of a sound mind to all in places of authority. Bless all those who labor in works of mercy or in schools of good learning. Care for all aged persons, and all little children, the sick and the afflicted, and those who travel by land or by sea. Remember all those who by reason of weakness are overtaken, or because of poverty are forgotten. Let the sorrowful sighing of the prisoners come before thee; and according to the greatness of thy power, preserve thou those that are appointed to die. Give ear to our prayer,

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O merciful and gracious Father, for the love of thy dear Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

Good but not Absolute

AND I WILL GIVE HIM A WHITE STONE, WITH A NEW NAME WRITTEN ON THE STONE (REVELATION 2:17).

Finding your identity does not mean getting rid of all your ambitions. Nor does it mean becoming 'spiritual' in the wrong way, that is, to be 'so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good,' as the expression goes. There is a tradition in the history of the church called mysticism. There are many varieties of mysticism, but most have in common a disdain for the world, and a gaze into the heavens that prizes intangible things over this-worldly living. It's an important balance to keep. The present world will not last. The world to come is the more permanent place. And yet this view should not lure us away from today's earthly tasks.

Here is an example from the New Testament. In his magnificently constructed letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul describes the Christian life as one of blessedness, that is, of great joy in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3). He declares God's purposes in us to be 'to the praise of his glorious grace' (1:6). This

1. John Heyl Vincent, *The Church at Home* (New York: The Christian Herald, 1904) p. 311.

language is about our existence being for the purpose of worshiping God. The language could not be more spiritual. The entire first half of this letter piles on the many dimensions of God's grace and mercy to us. Then, without leaving off these thoughts, the apostle focuses on application. Among other issues in the Christian life, Paul discusses money. It's brief but to the point:

LET THE THIEF NO LONGER STEAL, BUT RATHER LET HIM LABOR, DOING HONEST WORK WITH HIS OWN HANDS, SO THAT HE MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING TO SHARE WITH ANYONE IN NEED (EPHESIANS 4:28).

From the lofty heights of God's praise, we move to the need to reform the way we handle our finances. Stealing is not only the devious burglar who breaks into a home and makes off with the silver. It can be cheating on taxes, not sharing gratuities, siphoning fuel from another car, plagiarizing examination answers, and so forth. Even desiring something we shouldn't have is a form of theft. So, the apostle says that now that we are in Christ and have the power to change, we must desist from thieving. However, the gospel never stops at the negative. It always goes on to replace what is forbidden with what is now commended.

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Paul says two things. First, we must work with our own hands. Manual labor is an important form of work, but today it is hardly the only form. There is a great variety of legitimate work we may engage in, from desk jobs to sales to scholarship to athletics, and much more. When he says to do it with our own hands he means the work must be our own, not done illegitimately. This, among other things, is a way to provide for oneself and one's family, before the 'audience of one'. But then second, he says to take some of the gain and give it to the needy. The whole subject of poverty relief is a large and complex one. But the principle is that we ought to do it.

How does this relate to identity? Because our human person is meant to be lived not only before God, who sees all, but in the light of Jesus Christ, who so loved us that 'though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). The great appeal of the gospel is that it gives us a new identity, one that is in continuity with our particular selves, yet makes us new persons. Our new self begins here in this life and then in the life to come will be raised up to enjoy fellowship with God forever. Paul in another place says that 'if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is true

both now, even though we are still in our old frail bodies, and in the life to come when we will be made fully whole. C. S. Lewis puts this beautifully:

The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because He made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.²

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe your own search for identity. What is it like? Where do you go for answers?
2. Do you feel there is too much pressure on you or your friends as individuals to make career choices at an early age?
3. Is work an over-rated value? Should we worry about unemployment? What are we to do if the perfect job does not show up for us? How should work be connected to our identity?

2. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone – Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 190.

Only one Way?

A COMMON MISTAKE WE MAKE IS THAT WE LOOK FOR GOD IN PLACES WHERE WE OURSELVES WISH TO FIND HIM (CHRIS JAMI).

When I was a child, I dreamed a good deal, as many children do. One of my recurrent dreams was being in a forest, or somewhere on a warm plain, but lost. Often, though these places were beautiful, I would feel rather desperate and frustrated at not finding the path home. Only when I woke up did I find a measure of relief. The apostle Paul (who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament) uses a similar image to describe how humanity is searching for the truth. He tells an Athenian audience that God made all of humanity and set all people in specific locations all over the earth, 'that they might feel their way toward him and find him' (Acts 17:27). The Greek word he uses