

Chapter Five

The Loss of Identity

“The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.”

Psalm 135:15–18

In an April 2013 *Sports Illustrated* article, NBA center Jason Collins announced to the world that he was gay. It became a major news story. At the time, the big-three professional sports leagues (the NBA, NFL, and MLB) were largely untouched by the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) revolution.

The response was almost universally positive. President Obama called Collins with his personal congratulations, and the First Lady tweeted, “We’ve got your back.” Basketball legends, celebrities, and media praised the announcement as historic and groundbreaking. The most common reaction was: “Finally, Jason Collins can be himself” or “He no longer has to hide who he is.”

Following the announcement, NBA analyst Chris Broussard faced a number of questions about the story’s implications on the ESPN show *Outside the Lines*: Would more players now come out as gay? How would his teammates react? Would teams shy away from signing Collins, who had been a solid role player throughout his career? It was a fascinating conversation.

Then it got personal.

Broussard, who is open about his own Christian faith, was asked about something that had nothing to do with basketball: Did he agree with Collins’s claim that there was no conflict between his Christian faith and living as a sexually active gay man? Broussard answered,

Personally I don’t believe that you can live an openly homosexual lifestyle or an openly ... like premarital sex between heterosexuals [sic].... If you’re openly living that type of lifestyle, then the Bible says “you know them by their fruits.” It says that, you know, that’s a sin.... And if you’re openly living in unrepentant sin, whatever it may be, not just homosexuality—adultery, fornication, premarital sex between heterosexuals—whatever it may be, I believe that’s walking in open rebellion to God and to Jesus Christ. So I would not characterize that person as a Christian because I don’t think the Bible would characterize them as a Christian. [1](#)

You can imagine what happened next. Critics demanded that Broussard resign or be fired. They said he was an intolerant bigot who clearly hated homosexuals.

If you look carefully at what Broussard said, he didn’t just single out Collins but condemned the sexual behavior of many players in the NBA. However, an outspoken minority of people loudly proclaimed that his views on homosexuality were unacceptable, that Broussard should have known that hateful and bigoted views like his are to be kept out of public conversation, even if he was directly asked to share them. For them, being a Christian and holding the views of popes, pastors, theologians, and leaders—not to mention a significant portion of the American population—are no excuse.

When Jason Collins announced his sexuality, he was encouraged to share *his* truth. But Chris Broussard was told that his Christian faith amounted to little more than a personal opinion he should keep to himself.

The Cultural Identity Crisis

The Jason Collins story illustrates how our culture is caught up in an identity crisis. Sex used to be talked about in terms of behavior. It was something you did. Now it's "who you are." Your sexual desires and attractions define you. In today's culture, sexuality can be your identity.

Sexuality is confused with identity because our culture has lost what it means to be human. And our changing answers to this important worldview question will have dramatic consequences.

Imagine a car company stockpiling engines, steering wheels, bumpers, tires, seat covers, and other parts, intending to launch a new line of automobiles.

"What kind of cars will you build?" you ask the CEO. "Full size or midsize? What will they look like when they're finished?"

"No idea," he replies. "We'll just throw the parts together and see what happens." Yeah, those cars won't work very well, will they? A carmaker with no clear idea on what a car is, is a company without a promising future.

In the same way, if you don't know what it really means to be human—what you are, what your purpose is, and why you are here in the first place—then you're left to make up your own answers. All you can do is throw "parts" together. Identity becomes whatever you want it to be. Race, class, interests, hobbies, accomplishments, and even sexuality are the categories we now use to represent who we are to the world.

A carmaker with no idea what a car is can't make cars that function properly. The result? Broken-down cars. Likewise, people with no idea what a human being is (the Big Story), can't tell us how we should properly live our lives. The result? Broken-down human beings.

Welcome to identity after Christianity.

Christianity has contributed many things to the world, but none more important than its vision of the human person. As atheist philosopher Luc Ferry describes it, "Christianity was to introduce the notion that ... men were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance."²

Human dignity and equality are concepts everyone accepts today. But most forget that they grew out of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei* ("image of God"), the biblical vision that God created humans specially and uniquely, endowing them with eternal value. Many people want the fruit of human dignity while soundly condemning its Christian roots. That just doesn't work.

As the twentieth century demonstrated through war, violence, ethnic cleansing, and human bloodshed, severing human dignity from its Christian roots is foolish, even deadly. God made us in His image. We can only know ourselves if we know God. And without God, we no longer know who we are. Human life becomes just a bunch of random nerve endings and reflexes with no real purpose.

The twenty-first century, having inherited that twentieth-century baggage, is full of contradiction. We want human rights without knowing what a human is. Students are educated with *whats* and *hows* but offered no coherent vision of *why*. Some babies are dramatically protected, operated on, and saved in the womb, while other babies are targeted for abortion, particularly those with disabilities.

Human culture wants to flourish without God. But it won't happen. As society rejects God, it chooses instead to worship modern idols:

Self. The first of the Ten Commandments is "You shall have no other gods before [Me]" (Ex. 20:3). Today we have no other gods before *me*.

State. The apostle Paul wrote, "My God will supply every need" (Phil. 4:19). Today people increasingly look to government to supply their needs.

Sex. God gave this very good gift to us as a means of expressing love and marital oneness. Today it's many people's highest pursuit, an end in and of itself.

Science. God created an orderly and intricate universe. Today the word of science (or, more accurately, of scientists) has replaced the Word of God as the source of truth and knowledge.

Stuff. Blaise Pascal famously wrote of a God-shaped void we all have that only God can fill. ³ Today the constant barrage of commercials and marketing slogans proclaims that the void in our heart is stuff-shaped.

Idols can never replace God. Instead they dehumanize us. The psalmist wrote, "Those who make [idols] become like them, so do all who trust in them" (Ps. 135:18). The truth is we see ourselves and others in the image of whatever it is we worship. For example, those who make sex an idol see people only as sexual objects, valued because of their appearance and used for pleasure. Christ followers view every individual with inherent dignity and value.

The cultural identity crisis also creates a personal identity crisis. As a student, you may especially struggle with who you are and why you're here. You might see your friends succumb to false identities, such as "I am what I can do" or "I am what others think I am" or "I am my sexual inclinations" or "I am what I look like." And you see and feel the effects. Sadness. Anxiety. Depression. Anger. Suicidal thoughts. Broken lives.

If we don't know what it means to be human, how can we know what it means to be Christian? Discipleship is the only antidote for this confusion. You must know not only what to believe and how to behave but also who you are as a redeemed image bearer of the Creator.

Who Are You, Really?

How can you form an identity, discerning the truth from the lies about what makes you who you are? These three areas are critical in contributing to identity formation: story, questions, and community.

Story

Think of the person you know better than anyone else in the world. Is it because you've memorized that person's weight, height, IQ, blood type, and SAT scores?

Of course not! We know people by their stories. When they tell us where they're from, what their families are like, and what they enjoy doing, they're revealing who they are by offering bits and pieces of their stories. Story and identity are intimately connected.

Many students don't know who they are largely because today's postmodern culture doesn't have a coherent story. Postmodernism rejects the existence of a universal Story of history and humanity. ⁴ But throughout the Old Testament, the psalmists and the prophets called Israel to obedience by telling and retelling the Story of how God chose, led, and rescued them as His people. The New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul and Peter, consistently reminds the church of who they are as God's new people by telling and retelling the Story of how God, in Christ, chose, led, and rescued them as His people.

In a storyless culture, Christ followers must know the true Story of all reality. Christians often talk about, but rarely define, finding our "identity in Christ." Biblically speaking, however, we can't know our identity in Christ without knowing His Story as revealed in Scripture.

In chapter 2, we explained how the Story of Scripture is told in four chapters: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Each chapter reveals core truths about our identity as image bearers: we were created to

make something of the world, ruling God's place for His glory (creation); we rebelled, human sin brought death into the world (fall); we were rescued by Jesus Christ, who exchanged His righteousness for our unrighteousness (redemption); we are called back to our full humanity as both messengers and agents of the risen Christ, who is "making all things new" (restoration). With this Story, the Bible frames all of reality—including our identity.

Questioning

A second area that's critical to forming your identity is asking difficult questions about God, life, and faith.

Canadian behavioral psychologist James Marcia has done extensive research on identity formation.⁵ He identified four stages—*diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, and *achievement*—based on two critical questions: (1) Have you wrestled with life's big questions (i.e., origins, identity, meaning, morality, and destiny)? and (2) Have you committed to a particular vision of life based on your exploration of the alternatives?

- People in a state of *diffusion* have neither explored life's meaning nor made any commitments to a particular vision of life. They have no real sense of who they are.
- Those in *foreclosure* have committed to a vision of life without ever wrestling with the questions themselves. Instead, they embrace the vision of others—for example, their parents or their community.
- *Moratorium* describes those who constantly explore alternative visions of life but refuse to commit to any of them. Always questioning, they never settle on any answers.
- *Achievement* is the stage for those who have sufficiently wrestled with the big questions and have sufficiently committed to a vision of life. They know who they are and how they fit in the world.

Pause for a moment and ask, "What stage am I in?" Our culture often leaves students in perpetual *moratorium*, constantly barraging you with new ideas and information. You're continuously told to question everything, to explore every alternative, and to keep an open mind on everything from religion to gender. But if you're stuck in moratorium, you'll be incredibly unstable, prone to deception, disappointment, and cynicism.

On the other hand, Marcia's description of *foreclosure* describes Christian teenagers who've never wrestled with whether Christianity is, in fact, true. Maybe it's because they're living off their parents' faith. If you find yourself here, one atheist professor, sexual failure, or personal tragedy can cause you to lose your faith. Simply put, your worldview just isn't big enough for the challenges of the real world.⁶

It's crucial that you go to your parents or find a Christian mentor who can help you answer and understand life's biggest questions. By walking with a trusted adult who takes your questions and doubts seriously, you can discover your true identity. The capacity for curiosity and struggle is among God's greatest gifts to us. Yet the ultimate purpose of questioning isn't merely to question, nor is it to find answers and win arguments. Identity is found when you commit to a life in the service of Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Identity requires believing. It also requires belonging, so don't wrestle with these questions alone.

Community

The God who made us in His image is Himself an eternal community called the Trinity. This means He doesn't merely *do* relationships; He *is* a relationship. As His image bearers, we'll never know who we are in isolation from others.

This is why church isn't optional. It's the community of God to which we belong and with whom we're to live and serve. For the believer, there is no substitute for the church.

Maybe you've seen the statistics about older teens and college students dropping out of church. There are many reasons for this, but one is the tendency of churches to age-segregate their members. Often, we show up at church and completely separate ourselves. Children go to their class, youth to their program, and adults to "big church." Age-specific programming for children and youth can be helpful but often become a substitute for church, cutting us off from one another. This means you may miss out on wise adult mentors and fail to learn what it truly means to be part of a community you desperately need.

Don't be a statistic. Encourage your group of friends to attend church and engage in small-group Bible study. Get radical and ask your youth pastor to cancel the Sunday morning youth program so the students can worship side by side with the adults. We all need to be part of the church community from the beginning, developing relationships with all age groups, learning to serve, and participating in God's mission, *together*. You need the church, especially as you enter adulthood and start making so many critical life decisions.

And, it should be added, the church needs you too.