

Identity: What Is it & How Is It Formed?

Made to Minister Conference | Jonathan D. Holmes

Introduction:

Carl Trueman: The fact that “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” makes sense to Joe Smith probably has far less to do with him being committed to an elaborate understanding of the nature of gender and its relationship to biological sex than to the fact that it seems intuitively correct to affirm someone in his or her chosen identity and hurtful not to do so, however strange the particulars of that self-identification might have seemed to previous generations.¹

Desmond Tutu: There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.

Jonathan Haidt:

- *Test 1:* Is it harmful or not?
- *Test 2:* Is it freeing or oppressive?
- *Test 3:* Is it fair or discriminatory?²

Expressive individualism

Andrew T. Walker: What is at the root of humanity’s assault on God-defined expressions of sexuality and gender? God’s authority over sexual desire and sexual relationships, and God’s design for how gender is conceived and expressed, is cast off. As it is with every issue of ethics and morality, the idea that any objective standard exists and is binding begins and ends with whether God exists and whether He intends to hold individuals accountable for their actions.³

¹ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 38.

² The other three are: loyalty & betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation

³ Andrew T. Walker, “Gender and Sexuality,” *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/gender-and-sexuality/>. Accessed 25 October 2021.

Understanding human identity and how it is developed

Traditional identity

Modern identity

- *Jean Jacques-Rousseau*: The individual is at his best—he is most truly himself as he should be—when he acts in accordance with his nature.⁴
- *Camille Paglia*: Fate, not God, has given us this flesh. We have absolute claim to our bodies and may do with them as we see fit. (*Vamps & Tramps*)

⁴ Trueman, 123.

Modern identity: problems and critiques

- Modern identity is incoherent
 - *Nancy Pearcey*: Though our feelings are important...they are not what define our identity. Nor are they a reliable guide to God's purposes. Because we are fallen and sinful, our feelings fluctuate over time. The most reliable marker of who we are is our physically embodied, God-given identity as male and female.⁵
- Modern identity is crushing
 - *Christopher Watkins*: The fact that we are in the image of God and are not God therefore prevents us from thinking too highly of ourselves. It also prevents us from assuming the burden of defining ourselves. It reminds us that we are not the final court of appeal in questions about our own identity...I do not ultimately own or define myself.⁶
- Modern identity is fragile
- Modern identity is exhausting
 - *Alan Noble*: But the freedom of sovereign individualism comes at a great price. Once I am liberated from all social, moral, natural, and religious values. I become responsible for the meaning of my own life. With no God to judge or justify me, I have to be my own judge and redeemer. This burden manifests as a desperate need to justify our lives through identity crafting and expression. But because everyone else is also working frantically to craft and express their own identity, society becomes a space of vicious competition between individuals vying for attention, meaning, and significance, not unlike the contrived drama of reality TV.⁷

⁵ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering the Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 156.

⁶ Christopher Watkins, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 93.

⁷ Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God In An Inhuman World*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 4.

- Modern identity is an illusion
 - *Jeremy Treat*: It's interesting how being "true to yourself" usually means aligning with some mainstream cultural narrative.⁸

Gospel Identity

- *Matthew 10:39*: Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
- *John Stott*: The astonishing paradox of Christ's teaching and of Christian experience is this: if we lose ourselves in following Christ, we actually find ourselves. True self-denial is self-discovery.
- *Alan Noble*: There is no image for you to maintain because you were made in the image of God. There is no identity for you to discover or create because our identity was never actually in question.⁹

⁸ <https://twitter.com/JeremyTreat5/status/1173624816382795777>.

⁹ Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God In An Inhuman World*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 136-137.