

Identity, E.T., and Me



In the movie *Unknown*, five people wake up in a chemical warehouse with no recollection of who they are or how they got there. Weapons are lying on the ground. One of them is tied up. There is no escape from the warehouse. Several of them search for clues in the warehouse, seeking to discover who they are and why they are there. They find a police officer

dead in a closet. They also find a newspaper and realize that two of them are kidnapped police officers and three of them are kidnappers. But they don't know who is who. They remember nothing from their past, nothing from their childhood. They cannot recall how they got to the warehouse. No one even knows his own name. After a phone call to the warehouse, they realize that the rest of the criminal crew will soon be returning to the warehouse. They must figure out a way to escape. But they struggle with how to live out the situation because each one is wondering if he is the kidnapper or the kidnapped. Do I live as a criminal? Do I live as a police officer? They don't know how to behave in the warehouse because they don't know who they are. During a struggle the main character says, "How do I know how to act when I don't even know who I am?"

Great question. How do you know how to live if you don't know who you are? God wants you to know exactly who you are in relation to the world around you. So that you will live out the reality of who you are in this world, God reminds you of your identity through the apostle Peter's letter: Peter was writing a group of Christians who were struggling with how to live in this world. These Christians were experiencing intense persecution. They were hated. The root of the hostility toward them was the fire that burned Rome to the ground. The Roman culture was devastated. Careers were lost. Homes were burned. Families were ripped apart. People died. Life as they knew it was gone. It was a huge tragedy. The Roman citizens wanted to blame someone. Anger and frustration needed to be directed toward someone. Initially the Romans believed that Nero, the Roman emperor, had set fire to his own city. He was suspected of the unthinkable act because of his insatiable desire to build new things. He loved building projects. Nero responded by shifting the blame and hatred toward other people. He blamed you. Nero directed the blame toward Christians. He accused Christians of

setting fire to the city; therefore, great hostility and persecution broke out against the Christians, not only in Rome but also all over the Roman Empire. Christians were spread and dispersed everywhere, and they were wondering how to live now in this world. How do we know how to live when we don't know exactly how we fit? Peter reminds us of our relationship to the culture, to the world around us. We must know who we are if we are going to live out the faith in our culture. We must understand who we are in relation to the world around us. **What lessons can we learn from this 1 Peter 2:11-12?**

1. We learn where we fit (or not).

Is the world as we know it right now our home? Is that the message our culture claims? In light of *Psalm 50:12; 24:1*, is the tony Montano quote “The world is yours” true?

How do you view yourself in relation to the world around you? Many people view this world as their home. And why not? They sleep, eat, play, work, commute, and live in this world. In their mind this world is where they fit. It is where they belong. Add some ambition, and we find the recipe for the world's version of success. Several years ago a popular gang movie was based on the Miami drug scene. The movie Scarface has become iconic in our culture. In recent years a video game based on the movie was released. The name of the video game is “Scarface: The World Is Yours.” The world is yours.

The phrase comes from the movie. [In the movie Tony Montano lived in a huge mansion. In the foyer of the mansion was a statue of the world and written on it was the phrase, “The world is yours.” The world is yours. The message is erroneous. The world is not yours or mine. The world belongs to God. Actually, Scarface hijacked the classic line from the Scripture. God says, “The world and everything in it is Mine” (Ps. 50: 12). Ironically, at the end of the movie, Scarface is shot and killed. He falls dead into the pool underneath the statue. And all he collected in his brief life stayed behind. The world was not his. (Geiger, Eric (2010-07-19). *Identity*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)]

2. We learn what we are, really.

What does “alien” mean? What is *1 Peter 2:11* telling us to do when it comes to the living out of our identity? Why should we live it out?

In the original language, alien literally means you are someone who lives alongside the people who belong in a particular place. You visit a family in Paris. You don't really belong. You're not part of the family. You live alongside the family, but you are not a member of the house. You don't have a key. You don't have a room in the house or a seat at the table, except the seat they offer you. You are on the outside. You are not a citizen here. You are a stranger in this world. You are a foreigner in this land because of your faith.

So, you feel awkward at times. You often sense you don't quite fit. Some people look at you like you are odd. You are odd. You belong to the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of this world. Peter begs these Christians to live out their identity as aliens and strangers. “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Pet. 2: 11 NIV). Peter is pleading, “Please get this. Please live out the reality of your identity.” Why is Peter begging?

Remember, the world was watching these Christians to see how they lived. They were under a microscope. They were accused of starting the fire that burned Rome to the ground. People were looking for any inconsistency in the lives of these Christians. We know nothing hurts the cause of Christ more than Christians who do not live out their faith. **** Nothing hurts the movement of the gospel more than our failing to live what we say we believe.**** The Hindu leader Gandhi reportedly said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

3. We learn what makes us different.

A. We live under a different KING.

What is the Christian's confession? How does that differ from what a fallen world follows? In *Matthew 4:19-20*, what does “dropping their nets” indicate? *How does this differ from what some professing Christians follow (Matthew 28:10; James 1:22; 1 John 2:6)?

Countries, cities, and cultures are often characterized by their leader. Germany was marked by Hitler's dictatorship for a generation. The United States was dramatically impacted by Abraham Lincoln's leadership. New York City was redefined by Rudolph Giuliani's administration. And Cincinnati was marked by Jerry Springer's leadership as

mayor. Umm, maybe not. For the sake of the 'Nati, let's hope not. The kingdom of God is led by KING JESUS. You are a member of His kingdom; therefore, you follow His leadership. He is your king. He became your leader, YOUR LORD (with CAP) when you became a Christian. A prerequisite for belonging to the kingdom of God is submitting your life to Christ as your Lord, your boss, and your leader (Rom. 10: 9). You follow a different leader than those who are citizens of this world.

Christ's invitation to His disciples was simple and clear, "Follow Me." When Peter and Andrew responded to Christ's invitation, they dropped their fishing nets (Matt. 4: 19-20). The dropping of their nets was symbolic of a quick farewell to their old way of life. They left their profession, their homes, their daily routine, and their families. They left everything to follow Christ. *Jesus never asked His disciples to follow a religious institution or denomination. He always insisted, "Follow Me." Being a Christian has always been about following Christ. The call to follow Him is not complicated. We simply lay down our nets and follow.

Unfortunately we often complicate and pollute the simplicity of the faith. We often view Christianity as an institution (that Christ created by His Word & Blood, but CAN & often DOES become an entity unto itself rather than representing JESUS) to believe in or a creed to sign off on. Sadly we produce some Christian leaders who are more passionate about a particular doctrinal position than about Christ. In some circles following Christ has been reduced to believing the right information. We have confused information with transformation. Do not misread me. Our beliefs are vital; they matter. God cares deeply what we believe about Him, but our beliefs should be reflected in our transformed lives. Being a disciple means obeying all that Jesus commanded, not just knowing His commands (Matt. 28: 19). We are called to live the faith, not just hear it (James 1: 22). We are invited to follow our leader in how we walk in this world, not just in what we believe (1 John 2: 6).

B. We live under a different LAW.

What does Law point to, and what does that point to, Biblically? When does respect and love for God's Law morph into legalism? How does a Christian prove to be an alien when it comes to the Law?

People are accountable for the laws of the state or country where they reside. In some states there are some strange laws that amazingly are still on the books. Realizing that most laws are reactionary to specific situations makes the following laws hilarious. For example , in Ohio it is illegal to get a fish drunk. In Washington it is against the law to

attach a vending machine to a utility pole. In Texas it is illegal to sell one's eye. In New York you cannot walk around on Sundays with an ice cream cone in your pocket. In North Carolina it is illegal for elephants to be used to plow cotton fields.

Remember: Behind every LAW is a LAWGIVER. The Law points to a lawgiver. But WHO? We believe ultimately the only legit Lawgiver is GOD HIMSELF speaking through Scripture. So we LOVE God's Law. Out of gratitude to God, and for our own good, we seek to live out the Law in our lives. But we need to be careful.

Humanity is made in God's image, so people are going to be formulating laws. As Xns, we must guard against legalism in our faith. Because we have the God-given desire to differentiate ourselves from the world coupled with our proclivity to make laws, we have the tendency to develop a list of rules that mandates what separation from the world looks like. The religious crowd in Jesus' day was notorious for their laws. The Pharisees made rules about where to walk, how to eat, what to wear, and what you could not lift or carry on the Sabbath. They utilized rules to prove themselves more holy than others.

Modern-day Pharisees pull out similar rules. Maybe you have encountered some of the rules: Coed swimming is sinful. Playing spades with your parents is like playing cards with the devil himself. Good Christians don't listen to music with a beat or with electric guitars. People who respect God dress a specific way at church. True believers read only a certain version of the Bible. Real worship occurs only with a certain musical style. Setting up nonbiblical rules as essential reeks of Pharisaical legalism. And it gives Christians an undeserved bad name.

Our following God's REAL rules will make us odd enough. Don't add to it!

C. We speak a different LANGUAGE.

Who's voice do we listen to (*John 10:27*)? What kind of language do we speak?

As an alien in this world, you hear a different language. The language of the Shepherd. Different cultures and countries speak and hear different languages. Cultures are often defined by their language. If you don't know the language, you don't belong. In New Orleans in the South, people say "Nawlins" & "y'all". How y'all doing? Move to the Midwest, you will most likely get roasted for saying y'all. If you move to Jersey or Philly, you're guys. Actually pronounced youz guyz.

Regardless of culture, Christians speak TRUTHFUL WORDS, and RESPECTFUL, HUMBLE Words (Give a reason . . . with humility)

AS ALIENS, WE CAN RELATE TO CULTURE ONE OF 5 WAYS, BUT ONLY ONE IS FAITHFUL TO SCRIPTURE!!

What is your response to the world around you? Do you live a godly life among people who are without Christ? For centuries Christians have debated what our response to the world around us should be. During the 1940s, Yale professor Richard Niehbur gave a series of lectures on how Christians respond to culture. His lectures became a classic book entitled *Christ and Culture*. In the book, Niehbur explains five common Christian responses to the world around us. While my updating and brief take on the five common reactions to culture might differ somewhat from Niehbur's original lecture, I give him credit for providing a great framework for discussion.

- The first response to the world around us is **Christ above culture**. This view emphasizes that Christians are above the culture; therefore, they do not need to engage the culture. The Christ above culture view says, “We are better than you. Our way of life is better than yours. In fact, we are so above the culture that we should isolate ourselves from the world.” People who practice Christ above culture remove themselves as much as possible from the culture. The movie *The Village* is a good example. Many Christians live in a secluded village. They seek jobs with other Christians, spend several nights a week at church, place their kids in Christian little leagues, and only “fellowship” with other believers. They lay their heads on their pillows at night thanking God they lived another day unscathed by the world. Village life is not the Christian life. While those who disengage from the world believe they are obeying God, they are living the antithesis of the gospel and Peter's challenge. Christ came to this world, and Peter challenges us to live such good lives “among the pagans” — not removed from them.
- The second response to the world is **The Christ of culture**. People who adopt a Christ of culture view of the world believe that Christ is fully in the culture. He is in every thought. He is in every movie. He is in every conversation. He is in the strip club because God made the woman who is dancing. And He made the pole. God is in the Fergie song because He inspired all types of music. He is everywhere and in everything; you just have to open your eyes to see Him. In conversations with dope

heads, guys will insist God created marijuana for them to enjoy life. One even insisted God is in the weed so the more he smoked, the more he “got God in his lungs.” Yeah, dude. Christ of culture sounds (and smells) a lot like pantheism: God is in all. He is in everything; therefore, Christians can embrace and enjoy the culture fully because Christ is there. While village living compromises the mission of Christ, those who practice Christ of culture violate the holiness of Christ (James 4: 4).

- The third response to our world is ***Christ against culture***. People who are against the culture insist they are on an assignment from God to attack the culture, to expose everything that is wrong with the context in which they live. They are similar to the Christ above culture group, but instead of choosing isolation they picket and protest. The worst expression of Christ against culture is extremists who blow up abortion clinics in the name of God. The best expression is Christians who approach life as a battle with people who are not Christian. While the spiritual life is portrayed as a battle throughout Scripture, the battle is against our own desires and against the powers of darkness (Eph. 6: 12), not against people. Instead of expressing love to people in the culture, the Christ against culture group expresses hatred and disgust.
- The fourth response to the world is ***Christ and culture in paradox***, or those who insist on straddling the fence and being one way in one context, and another way totally different in another context. Their values change with their surrounding. [Kristofferson: Poet/picker; prophet/pusher; pilgrim & a preacher & a problem when he’s stoned. He’s a walking contradiction, partly truth & partly fiction, taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home”]

Or we think like Luther. The world is thoroughly sinful and unredeemable. When we are dealing in the matters of the world, we cannot help but find ourselves dirty. The things of Christ are in a completely different category. This is the separation of church and state. This is the non-integration of faith and learning. When I'm doing science, it has nothing to do with doing religion. When I'm doing economics, it has nothing to do with my religion. I'm a business person following the bottom line during the week, and I worship God on Sunday. I “leave the church @ church”.

- The fifth response to the world is **Christ transforming culture**. People in the Christ transforming culture perspective believe Christ seeks to transform the culture and specifically the people within the culture. This view of culture cares predominately about the hearts of people within the culture. God desires for you to be an agent of transformation of culture, to live a good life among people who do not know Him. Your life should be a statement of the gospel, a walking billboard of God's transforming power. And as people see your righteously attractive life, God will draw them to Himself.

There's this preacher's, Kaye, who lives Christ transforming culture. She grew up in a small town with more cows than people but has gladly followed me to the cities where God has led us. In both Cincinnati and Miami, she sensed God urging her to teach in the public school system. She turned down very appealing Christian school offers (small class size and curriculum with a biblical worldview) to teach elementary kids in a public school. Kaye does not preach the gospel. She lives the gospel... in front of people. She loves people, works hard, teaches with creativity and excellence, engages families relationally, humbly stands for what is right, and lives a life filled with joy and peace.

In time people are curious about the difference in her life. And because of the trusted relationship she has with people, she is granted the privilege to explain the hope that she has (1 Pet. 3: 15). In Cincinnati her team teacher was JoAnn Tiemann. JoAnn and Kaye loved to teach together because they both are creative, passionate for kids, and love to have fun. They quickly became great friends. JoAnn was not a Christian. Not at first. Kaye never condemned JoAnn for her lifestyle (Christ against culture), nor did she participate in what JoAnn would try to rope her into (Christ of culture). Kaye did not ask to be transferred to another teaching team (Christ above culture); she simply lived the gospel in front of JoAnn. She brought her best to the classroom, displayed integrity, loved JoAnn, and began to share with her why she was so different. Kaye was used of God to be a transforming presence in the life of JoAnn. JoAnn became a Christian, and her life has never been the same.