


WHO AM I? The Significance Of Our Identity (introduction)



There's an ISSUE we all have to face, on a daily basis. Like an iceberg, we may be aware of only 20% of what is going on in our lives with this issue; but the other 80% literally shapes our lives – for better or worse. This dynamic, in fact, ends up being THE driving factor behaviorally in much of what we do with our lives. This issue, this dynamic, is the issue of IDENTITY.

What is IDENTITY? It's really a comprehensive term used to describe both who and what we are as individuals and as a group. The word itself comes from the Latin Word *identitas*, which means "same". So the idea behind identity is that it's something that both *sets us apart* as individuals and *draws us into community* with others who share the same "identity label" as us. Consider this dictionary definition:

i·den·ti·ty  (ī-dĕn'tī-tē)
n. pl. i·den·ti·ties

1. The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known:
2. The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.
3. The quality or condition of being the same as something else.
4. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality.
5. Information, such as an identification number, used to establish or prove a person's individuality, as in providing access to a credit account.

– from Dictionary.com

What SHAPES our IDENTITY?

Here are some dynamics that, taken together, weave a rich tapestry that is the fabric of our identity, of who we are... The extent to which each **dynamic** shapes us reveals itself in a multitude of ways.

R = Race / Ethnic group (Acts 17:28) "Race" usually has to do with physical features like skin, facial structure, etc. Ethnic has to do with more with language and beliefs. Red & Yellow, Black & White are the races, with bunches of mixtures. "I am African-American-black / Iranian / Jewish / Korean / Native American / Caucasian". [How many of you have some "Indian" blood (Choctaw, me) flowing in you?]. Some people see themselves **FIRST AND FOREMOST** as a _____. "Racism" properly defined is looking at life **PRIMARILY** dia the "lens" of race. "Racism" in its extreme is claiming "victim status" for your race + demanding reparations for past "injustices" done to your race. Some politicians use race as a "red herring" by labeling all those who disagree with his/her policies as "racists". BTW, the term "red herring" comes from the sport of fox hunting in which a dried, smoked herring, which is red in color, is dragged across the trail of the fox to throw the hounds off the scent. Thus, a "red herring" **argument** is one which distracts the audience from the issue in question. Question is: Is RACE what the CORE of your IDENTITY is all about? That's a question the BIBLE answers.

G = Gender (Genesis 1:27) → The designation of “male” or “female,” as created by God. It’s chromosomal and hormonal in nature w/ folks sometimes swimming in a sea of estrogen and/or testosterone [... “Preening” and “comparisons” & “tension so thick you can cut it with a knife”). Nowadays some people believe they’re “a woman trapped inside the body of a man” (or vice-versa) and get a sex change. Again, the problem of “oppression,” “victimization,” and “injustice” surfaces, as well as the idea of making “reparations.” “Feminism” sees GENDER as THE issue and seeks to “empower” women (a “fill-in-the-blank” concept, if there ever was one). But is GENDER our CORE identity? Is it who we really are?

I = INCOME (The RICH YOUNG RULER, Luke 18:18-34) → refers to \$\$ made & received through work, investments, and “entitlements”. There’s UPPER / MIDDLE / LOWER income families. Roughly speaking, \$20K & below = lower / \$50 = middle income / \$150 = upper income. There’s individual income & couple income. When this becomes a primary marker for identity, there’s both income envy and income snobbery, charges of “economic oppression,” and a call for “economic equality” which is the same as “redistribution of wealth”. The IDENTITY question is, “ARE you what you HAVE financially?” Is your CORE IDENTITY bound up in you INCOME?

W = Work → (Genesis 2:15) Or what you DO, physically, mentally, socially, to generate and income, to earn a living. You hear of white collar and blue collar workers, management and common labor, and other kinds of work. “Where do you WORK?” or “What do you do for a living” is usually one of the first question we ask of someone. For some people, their work is a source of honor and pride & respect; for others, it’s a source of dishonor and maybe disgrace [sweeping the floors at Goodyear], which is the reason for many euphemistic phrases describing different types of work [Camp Shelby, “waste management” = garbage truck / “post engineers” = lawn mowers]. Often our IDENTITY is bound up in our WORK, which is why when some people retire from work they get depressed. They think they’ve lost their identity. Or they see themselves positively and/or negatively as what they DO. We become human “doings” and if we’re not DOING whatever . . . we have identity issues. Is our CORE IDENTITY what we DO, our WORK?

A = Accomplishments (Daniel 4:30) → Has to do with goals achieved, victories, what’s on our resume. Some people are identified by what they have accomplished in life, “President / Senator / Congressman / Governor / Mayor / Hall of Famer Ray Guy / Super Bowl champion QB Drew Brees / Gold Metal Gymnast Shawn Johnson / Actor Brad Pitt / Emmy Award winning TV Host Kelly Ripa / Academy award winning Actor / Actress / Grammy-Winning singer-songwriter Paul Simon / Rock star Ted Nugent / Country Music megastar Brad Paisley. Best-Selling Author John Grisham. Some people who are famous for being famous. It’s about the trophy case, the blue ribbons, the awards, and the covers of magazines [“the cover of the rolling stone”], and what we post of Facebook. For some, our

CORE IDENTITY is bound up in what we have ACCOMPLISHED. As a corrective, some have gone in the total opposite direction and insisted there be no awards or that everyone get one. WHY? b/c IDENTITY is bound up in ACCOMPLISHMENTS. To what EXTENT should our CORE IDENTITY be bound up in OUR Accomplishments? [“Son, you let down the whole SCHOOL” = I’m a disappointment].

M = Morality (Romans 2:15) → the idea of being good or bad, right or wrong. Am I good person? A bad person? Good boy/girl/man/woman? And what do we mean by GOOD? Is a high school girl who is sweet, loyal to friends, makes good grades, is popular, involved in her youth group, and does community work every week but sleeps with her boyfriend a “good” person? Is she “moral”? In movie terms, we tend to see people as heroes and villains, white hats and black hats, protagonists antagonists. We say “He did a good thing” or “He did a bad thing.” AND . . . we tend to remember especially the BAD [Crosby & youth trip . . . me saying “Isaac Hays”] Is our CORE IDENTITY bound up in being able to label ourselves as a “good person”? And do we tend to look DOWN on people who are not as “good” morally as we are?

F = Family background & dynamics (Matthew 1 genealogy; Deut 6) A HUGE factor in identity! → Family systems, how the family functions and dysfunctions leaves a pretty much indelible imprint on who you are [“I have become my Daddy . . . “] It’s an area of struggle where sin abounds. Indulgent parents, overbearing parents, abusive parents, distant parents, controlling parents, power-hungry parents... passive children, rebellious children. Dads especially, distant / dictatorial. Children w/Low self-esteem VS children with PRIDE issues. “Tell me about your kinfolks All goes back to the family. We tend to blame our families “I inherited that . . . I’m that way b/c of the FAMILY I grew up in . . . “ But is our CORE IDENTITY based on our physically family? Should we see someone PRIMARILY in terms of their FAMILY? [Derek Ebbers & Uncle Bernie Ebbers / “She’s a JUUUUUSSSSLEY . . . “] We tend to look DOWN and UP to families and family names.

E = Education (Philippians 3:3-6) → HOW were you educated? Home? Private? Public? People educated in these contexts get labeled, for better or worse. Self-righteous and weird / elitist / brainwashed. Identity often bound up in LEVEL of education = HS (dropout) / Community College (dropout) / College (dropout) & degree in college / Graduate School / PhD. [“... Frankie Avalon “beauty school dropout . . . “] Identity often becomes bound up in WHERE we’re educated . . . & how derisively we speak of where OTHERS are educated. USM = “Hardy High” / MSU = “Cow College” or “Moo U” / OLE MISS = Snobby University, home of Suzie Sorority and Freddie Frat-Rat. We tend attach our CORE IDENTITY to HOW and WHERE we are educated. And it tends to be a source of PRIDE or SHAME. As do the ATHLETIC PROGRAMS of the places where we go to school. Should our CORE IDENTITY be attached in ANY way to our place or level of education?

P = Physical appearance / body image (Song of Solomon, whole book) → This is almost as HUGE as family, maybe as much. How we SEE ourselves physically / how others see us tends to be BIG-TIME identity shaper. “Body Image Issues” are so prevalent that people dealing with body issue issues flood counselors offices and the airwaves. The standard is set, by somebody, and we either fall short or make the cut. Height, weight, hair, skin, physical features of all kinds. And we NOTICE the FLAWS, don’t we? [Oh, yeah, the guy with the big nose / girl with the BIG MOLE on her face / guy w/the JAY LENO chin / girl who looks just like . . . some pretty actor/actress/singer/celebrity.] Body image GREATLY affects our IDENTITY. These days, seems like an inordinate amount of people struggle with BODY issues. But is our CORE IDENTITY bound up in how we LOOK?

R = Relationships (Philippians 1:3-6) → [I am the grandson of Cat and Emma Hatten and, the son of Edd and Winnie Jussely, the brother of Edd and David Jussely, the NEPHEW of my Aunts & Uncles, the COUSIN of my parent’s siblings children [Cousin Hootie, Budge, & Ladd & Doug & Edwinna & Doris & Little Vick & Ricky & Hazel & Ellen, & Mary & JoAnn] the UNCLE of my nephews & nieces & own & own. I live in RELATIONSHIP & in SOCIAL CONNECTION with others. We are SOCIAL creatures. But is the CORE of who I am bound up in WHO I am in relationship with, or WHO I know, or WHOSE name I can drop to make myself look good?

S = Sexual orientation (Genesis 1 & 2 Vs Romans 1) → I am straight / gay / hetero / homo / bi-sexual. That has to do with WHO I’m attracted to. Some say it’s a choice. Some say “I was born this way.” There’s judgment both ways on both sides of this issue, and self-righteous judgment going both ways. But IS my CORE IDENTITY based on my sexual identity or orientation?

R = Religious orientation (Acts 17:22ff) → Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, protestant, catholic, Baptist, Methodist, episcopelon, Lutheran, Presbyterian, church of Christ / God . . . atheist, agnostic, deist, pantheist? And what is our attitude toward ourselves for being what we are religiously and our attitude toward others. Is RELIGION the CORE COMPONENT of our Identity?

N = Nationality (Revelation 5:9, multitude of the redeemed multinational and multilingual) → English, Spanish, Latin American, Japanese, Korean, Iranian, we all have a national IDENTITY and our IDENTITY is often bound up in our NATIONALITY. But IS our NATIONALITY or CORE IDENTITY?

P = Political Perspective (Romans 13:1-7) → liberal / conservative / republican / democrat/ progressive / libertarian... again, we label, identify, affiliate, and either attack or defend. [NE Jackson, “republican sympathizer”, and went down in flames] But IS that our CORE identity?

C = Cultural affiliation (Acts 17:26, the boundaries of their appointed habitation) → hip-hop / urban / suburban / nerds / jocks / plastics / teen culture / drug culture / southern / west coast / east coast / northern / Brandon / pearl / Flowood / Madison / Jackson / delta / coast = shared group(s) identity. But IS that our CORE identity?

The question is not whether these dynamics shape our identity. The issue has to do with the WEIGHT each dynamic should play in shaping our identity. For as Christian, WHAT is the most IMPORTANT dynamic that outweighs all other dynamics and should be THE major dynamic that identifies us? Or to put it another way, how SHOULD we label ourselves? Here's a working (and profoundly simple yet simply profound) identity statement every Christian should and in fact MUST embrace in order to live life to the fullest.

We ARE who and what the BIBLE says we are! (cf *Philippians 3:4-9*).

Or you can personalize it, "I am what . . ." Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. And nothing should carry more weight in our identity formation than the Bible tells us. The Voice of the Lord speaking through His Word is – or should be – the ultimate dynamic that informs our identity.

The question "What does GOD say, in His Word, about my identity?" just may be the most important question we can ask and teach our children and their children to ask.