

# Identity

(Psalm 8)

## The Big Idea

*Human identity is defined in Scripture, has been shattered by the Fall, but is redeemed in Jesus Christ.*

*Pray*

## Introduction - A Question of Identity

I'm sure you know as well as I do that a hot topic in our society today is that of human identity, particularly human gender identity. You can't turn on the TV, or open a newspaper without some reference to or opinion on gender identity - what actually constitutes being male or female, or whether these are really the right categories to be used for describing human identity.

One of the events that brought this whole issue out into the mainstream was the recent controversy in the American state of North Carolina, about legislating bathroom use according to birth gender.

The Guardian newspaper dubbed it "the flush heard around the world."<sup>1</sup>

Since then, it seems like the whole world has been thrown into confusion. Where human gender identity was previously thought in mainstream society as what's called "binary" (that's where there's only two options of male or female - granted with some exceptions who occupy other categories) to the idea that human gender identity is both spectral (with a range of expressions) but also fluid (infinitely and continuously changeable).

The Gospel Coalition website recently published a glossary of thirty-one terms, including gender neutral pronouns, to help readers navigate the new language that is constantly evolving to express the perceived nuances in this identity revolution. They also point out that Facebook currently allows its users to select from more than seventy gender options.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/14/north-carolina-bathroom-bill-hb2-transgender-rights> (Accessed Monday 13 June 2016 at 3.30pm)

We live in a society where my identity is something I define for myself - and may have nothing to do with biology, ethnicity or culture. I find my identity in my own head and my own heart, and it is whatever I decide it to be, whenever I decide it to be.

A recent social experiment by the Family Policy Institute of Washington in the US<sup>2</sup> gave a fascinating insight into the way the identity revolution is shaping the minds of college students. You might have seen the video which we posted on our Facebook page during the week.

In the video, a white male (from the lower-end of average height) conducts interviews with college students on the Washington University campus, and challenges them with questions about his own identity. He finishes by going around asking students, "What if I told you I am a 6'5" Chinese woman?" The scary thing is that none of the students are willing to tell him he's wrong. Instead, they feel it either isn't their place to interfere with another's beliefs, or else would be open to discussing the issue to seek understanding.

This just goes to show that what some have termed a human identity *revolution* is actually more of a human identity *crisis*. This is no different here in Australia.

In 2013, the 1984 Sex Discrimination Act was amended to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status. While I believe non-discrimination acts have an important place in our laws, what's clear is that a shift has occurred in Australian society between 1984 and 2013, particularly around our attitudes to human identity. That shift continues today in the Marriage Equality debate, and shows no signs of slowing down.

Now, I'm not here to talk to you about sociology. I'm here to talk to you about the Bible. But these two things intersect: if we believe the Bible to be the word of God, and live in this world, we need to somehow work out how we bring the Bible to bear on the way we think and act within our society; a society that's struggling with the fundamental question of human identity - who we really are.

To do that, I'd like us to spend our time this morning tackling **three questions**:

- 1. What does the Bible say about human identity?**
- 2. What does the Bible say to followers of Jesus about engaging with an identity-confused society?**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://dailysignal.com/2016/04/19/white-man-tells-college-kids-he-identifies-as-asian-woman-heres-what-happened/>  
(Accessed Thursday 16 June 2016 at 3.30pm)

### 3. What does the Bible say to followers of Jesus who struggle with their identity?

#### “...what is man...?”

We're going to use Psalm 8 as a springboard to other parts of the Bible this morning. If you've got a Bible with you, you might want to turn there now so you can see for yourself what it says.

You might have noticed that the writer of this song asks much the same question our society is asking, in v4, where he asks in three little words:

*“...what is man...”*

(Psalms 8:4 ESV)

What motivates him to ask this question about mankind's identity? Well, it's the place that man occupies in the world. As he observes the world, that he is convinced is created by God, he notices a few things about humanity.

Particularly, he notices how they are different from the animals. In fact, they are not just different, they are *above* the animals. Let's work backwards from v6-8:

*“You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”*

(Psalms 8:6–8 ESV)

I don't think there has ever been a single species of living thing alive in the world that has quite the same potential to influence our planet for better (or worse) than humanity. It seems to be within our capabilities to care for this planet, and its ecology as much as as it is within our capabilities to absolutely destroy it.

Why is this? Well, it's because of what the Psalmist says in v5-6:

*“Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;”*

(Psalms 8:5–6 ESV)

God (the 'you' in these verses) has carefully created mankind with specific attributes and carefully placed mankind in his creation to carry out a specific role. When David wrote this Psalm, he got that word "dominion" from Genesis 1, which is where we're going to go now. We'll return to Psalm 8 a little later.

## Image, Gender and Dominion

If you have a Bible with you, turn with me right to the first page, Genesis 1, and jump down to v26:

*"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*

*And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food."*

*And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."*

(Genesis 1:26–31 ESV)

There's that word "dominion". It pops up in v26 and v28. If you're interested, the Hebrew word here has the idea of "treading down", from where our Psalmist gets this idea of God placing everything under the feet of humanity.

What this passage in Genesis 1 actually gives us is a baseline for human identity, from the Creator, the originator, himself. We can notice **four things specifically**:

### 1. Human beings are made in the image of God

2. **Human beings are made to complement one-another within specific created genders of male and female**
3. **Human beings are made to rule the world under God**
4. **Human beings are made to multiply and fill the earth**

Let's briefly unpack those:

### **1. Made in the image of God (v26-27)**

What does it mean to be "made in the image of God"? The text of Genesis 1 gives us a clue using the parallel word "likeness" (v26). It's not an exact copy, but more of a reflection.

To explore this question fully we would need far more time than we have this morning, but we can make some simple observations of how humanity is designed to reflect God.

In one sense, our third point, about 'dominion' is really an expression of this first point: that as God rules the universe, so man rules the Earth under God - in some ways, the creation sees God *through* mankind as his divine representatives on earth. This is a great responsibility, and I wonder how often we even give it a thought. Bible scholar J.I. Packer has pointed out that

"This is what humans are made to do, and in one sense we are human only to the extent to which we are doing it."<sup>3</sup>

But there are other aspects to the way we reflect God's image and likeness - our ability to express emotion, our ability to relate personally to God and each other, our ability to exercise moral qualities.

As I said, these things don't come close to exhausting this principle, but if we turn it around for a moment, what it tells us that if we are going to truly understand our humanity, we have to look to God, the original, from which we are created in image and likeness. We have to look at what he is like, how he operates, how he expresses himself, and make that our baseline for who we are as human beings.

### **2. Made to complement one-another within specific created genders of male and female (v27)**

This is probably the idea of human identity that is most under fire at the moment. God created only two categories for humanity: male and and female (v27).

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<sup>3</sup> in *Knowing God*, by J.I. Packer © 1993 by Foundation For Reformation  
Grace Christian Church Buderim (Clint Lombard)

In the language of our time, God created made gender *binary*, with no spectrum in between.

Now, even these two distinct categories have been challenged, and some will encourage us not to read the Bible in such a close-minded way. But let's point out two very obvious things about God's binary gender categories.

The first is that both **male and female genders reflect the image of God equally in themselves.**

*“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*

(Genesis 1:27 ESV)

There is no need for members of one gender or another, or even those who struggle with their gender identity, to feel inferior before God, because he has created us with a divine dignity that is distinct from our gender.

We must bear in mind, however, that God hasn't created two different genders purely for the sake of variety. The two genders are created with different roles in mind, and therefore they express the image differently.

And this is the second obvious thing about God's binary gender categories - they are made to *multiply*.

What this tells us is that gender has to be *biological*, instead of just psychological. It also tells us that it has to be constant, rather than fluid. This is because the two genders have *purpose*.

God made humanity with a responsibility to extend his image and rule into the creation by producing more and more “image-bearers”. This cannot be achieved by two women on their own, or two men, or any other combination other than the exclusive union of a biological male and a biological female. In this, the two genders are *complimentary*: not lower and higher, not lesser and greater, but complimentary - created with care and attention for different roles that work together to achieve a common end - to care for the world and fill it with God's image for his glory.

This idea, despite it's clarity in the Bible, draws heaps of hostility from our society. But this comes from how we like to spend too much time thinking about what *I* want from *me*, and not enough time thinking about what *God* wants from *me*.

And if this is God's mandate for humanity, can we think that he won't judge us if we ignore it?

Back in our Psalm, you might have noticed how a consideration of mankind causes David to consider how great *God* is - that's the image-bearing working correctly. The sad truth is that often our consideration of mankind, especially in how progressive we are, causes us to consider how great we are, and forget our Creator altogether.

Now, we've basically covered points 2 and 4 in our discussion on point 1 and 3, so we're not going to go over the same ground again. But these four points serve to answer our first question, "What does the Bible say about human identity?" And that's the answer:

- 1. Human beings are made in the image of God**
- 2. Human beings are made to complement one-another within specific created genders of male and female**
- 3. Human beings are made to rule the world under God**
- 4. Human beings are made to multiply and fill the earth**

## **A Shattered Image (Hebrews 2)**

Now, Genesis 1 seems like a lovely idea, and David in Psalm 8 seems like he's writing a lovely song up on a hilltop somewhere away from the realities of the present world.

We live in a world where mankind isn't expressing the image of God in the way that Genesis 1 seems to mandate. Aside from the conscious rejection of mankind's role to rule under God, or the conscious abdication of God-given roles, we also have further issues.

There are those who cannot have children. What about them?

There are those who may never get married. What about them?

There are those who are born with genetic problems which makes even their biological gender ambiguous. What about them?

There are those, even Christians, who struggle with overwhelming desires to express their humanity in ways that contradict God's design for humankind. What about them?

Well, again, the Bible helps us here.

Let's turn over to the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 2. Here we'll find the writer of this New Testament letter reflecting on David's words in Psalm 8.

*"It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet."*

*Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him."*

(Hebrews 2:6–8 ESV)

The writer is holding Psalm 8 (with its references to Genesis 1) in the one hand, and he's holding the world around him in the other hand. And he's recognising that these two don't match up. The world is out of control, and mankind isn't occupying his mandated place in God's world. Sound familiar?

The event that shattered the image of God in man was the first sin in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve disobeyed a direct command from God to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Let's not trivialise this event. Forbidding humanity to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was in effect saying, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil, or the right to *define* good and define evil, does not belong to humanity, it belongs to God."

When humanity snatched at that knowledge we chose to reject God's definition of good and evil and instead define it for ourselves. And when we did that, we failed. Miserably.

Humanity was cast out of the Garden, and they were cursed by God. Note however that the mandate didn't change, and this is why we say the image was shattered, but not destroyed. It's like looking into a broken mirror, the reflection is distorted.

If you skim over Genesis 3, you'll see that humanity is still to exercise dominion over the creation, but the creation is going to push back - it's going to be hard. Humanity will still multiply and fill the earth, but the birth of every child will be painful. And in Genesis 3:16, even the gender roles are affected by sin:

*"Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."*

(Genesis 3:16 ESV)

The complementarity will still be there, but will be characterised by tension between man and woman.

The truth is, this is where our mixed up and confused ideas about human identity come from: the shattered image of God in man, the effects of sin in the world and even in our biology, the separation from our Creator brought about by sin.

Rosaria Butterfield was a tenured English professor at Syracuse University in the American state of New York. Her academic speciality was Queer Theory, and she was a lesbian feminist. In 1999, she was confronted by Jesus Christ, and her life was never the same. In her words, she became, "...a single ex-lesbian with a now defunct PhD."

She's written a book about her experience in coming to Christ.

In her book, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*, she reflects on her personal experience of how sin has messed up the way we think about our identity:

"This was the first of my many betrayals against the LGBT community: whose dictionary did I trust? The one used by the community that I helped create or the one that reflected the God who created me?"

"I still felt like a lesbian in my body and heart. That was, I felt, my real identity. But what is my true identity? The Bible makes clear that the real and the true have a troubled relationship on this side of eternity."<sup>4</sup>

Though it certainly isn't everyone's story, I might add that Butterfield went on to marry to a presbyterian pastor, and has four kids.

What's the solution then? How do we live with this troubled relationship between what feels so real, and what is actually true, this side of eternity, and this side of the Fall?

## Perfect Image and Perfect Identity

Well, if we turn back to our text in Hebrews 2, we'll see the answer. From v8:

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<sup>4</sup> p.25, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*, by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield © 2015 Crown and Covenant Publications  
Grace Christian Church Buderim (Clint Lombard)

*“Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”*

(Hebrews 2:8–9 ESV)

What wonderful words in a broken world: *“... we do not yet see everything in subjection to [humanity]. But we see him...”*

You see, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was made man, and came into the world to succeed where Adam, and you and I, have failed. He lived a perfect life, and died a perfect death, a sacrifice to God for our sin, and was exalted from death to the right hand of God. In so many ways, Jesus is the ultimate human. Jesus

He is the ultimate image of God.

*“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature”*

(Hebrews 1:3 ESV)

He exercises dominion over the world.

*“...he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”*

(Hebrews 1:3 ESV)

Jesus has perfected humanity.

What this is telling us, friends, is that though our identity has become confused and damaged by the Fall, the first sin, we can find a new identity in Jesus Christ, the perfect human being, Lord of the Universe, and the exact imprint and radiance of God himself, in a way mankind never could be. All across the Bible, we have writers reflecting on the new, whole identity that belong to those who are in Jesus:

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*

(2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV)

*"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

(Galatians 2:20 ESV)

You see, we need to stop looking "in here" to try and discover our identity. We need to look up, look at Jesus, and there we will discover what God has made our identity to be - confused and lost and rebellious children, found in Christ.

Jesus is our perfect image and our perfect identity.

We're now own a position to answer out second and third questions:

2. What does the Bible say to followers of Jesus about engaging with an identity-confused society?
3. What does the Bible say to followers of Jesus who struggle with their identity?

## **Engaging with an identity-confused society**

So, how do we engage with an identity-confused society as followers of Jesus?

Well this is where we need to be careful of our Christian culture getting in the way of the cross.

If we truly understand what the Bible says about human identity, we're not going to try and transform our society into a Genesis 1-world again. The Bible does make clear in Revelation that that's where it's all heading, but that's God's job in his own time.

What I mean is that we don't need to exhaust ourselves trying to make everyone a heterosexual, or make everyone fit into a binary gender. We need to show them Jesus - the ultimate human.

It can be very tempting to want to impose a Biblical framework on our society. But to do this without starting at Jesus is to put the cart before the horse, or like trying to ram a square peg into a round hole. We're not trying to win people to an ideology or a philosophy about human identity. We're trying to win people to a person - Jesus Christ, one who redeems and transforms and renews.

This is actually a very liberating truth in the face of the ever changing tides of our society. While it's useful to keep abreast of what's going on, and to be able to engage with it on an intellectual level by reading good books and good articles, nothing will have a greater impact than the gospel of Jesus Christ. He's a one-size-fits-all solution to the confusion and damage of our world; a perfect image in a world of shattered ones.

Paul writes in the New Testament about going to the modern and progressive 1st-century city of Corinth,

*“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*

(1 Corinthians 2:1–5 ESV)

If we go into the world proclaiming Jesus, no matter how simple our words, they are backed by God's power, a power that can do far more than we can ever imagine.

So, if you have the chance to talk to someone who struggles with their identity, or someone who has found an identity for themselves apart from God's design for humanity, don't try and argue them into a traditional, conservative, Christianised worldview. Instead, talk to them about Jesus, the Jesus who you know, and let God do the work.

To quote Rosaria Butterfield once more, particularly about what changed in her life:

*“My new affection was not heterosexuality, but Jesus. . . . I was converted not out of homosexuality, but out of unbelief.”<sup>5</sup>*

## **For those who struggle**

And finally, our third question. What does the Bible say to those who struggle with their identity?

Now this includes anyone who, for whatever reason, don't fit into God's original design for humanity. You might be struggling with your gender identity, you might be struggling with

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<sup>5</sup> p.50, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*, by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield © 2015 Crown and Covenant Publications  
Grace Christian Church Buderim (Clint Lombard)

same-sex attraction, or no desire for partnership whatsoever. You may suffer from a physical condition which makes it hard to find acceptance or even to accept yourself. You may have even be in a position where you are trying to choose between an identity which provides you with personal affirmation, and a faith which contradicts that identity.

Let me first say that if that's you, and if anything I've said this morning makes you feel disrespected, or marginalised, or disregarded, then I'm sorry. I certainly haven't intended that. You are welcome here, and God has something to say to you from his word in love.

And that is the good news: that you don't have to be defined by your gender, or your sexual preferences, or your physicality, despite what the world says. Because that's not actually *you*. Who you are is a much deeper thing, and the only person who sees you and knows you as you truly are is the God who created you.

David reflects on God's intimate knowledge of him in Psalm 139:

*"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."*

(Psalms 139:13–16 ESV)

And so if you truly want to find your identity, you need to go to God. He knows who you are. And you can approach him in the name of his son Jesus, the perfect human, who died for you to make you righteous before God.

Our God is a god who will listen patiently when you talk to him about your confusions, your anxieties, your distress, your temptations, your desires, your feelings, your struggles, and your sins. He doesn't expect us to come perfect - Jesus has done that for us. We can come before God honestly - he knows it all anyway - and find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

If you find yourself struggling with your identity this morning, and you want to talk to someone, I'd be more than happy to spend time talking to you after the service, or my contact details are on the front of the bulletin if you'd like to get in touch during the week.

Sam Allberry is a pastor in the UK who has written an excellent little book called *Is God Anti-Gay?* You can find it on the church library shelves. It's a particularly excellent book because Sam himself struggles with same-sex attraction, so he writes from a very real and personal perspective.

But listen to what he says about identity:

"...the kind of sexual attractions I experience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of what I feel but are not who I am in a fundamental sense. I am far more than my sexuality."

"And as someone in this situation, what Jesus calls me to do is exactly what he calls anyone to do. Take another well-known saying of Jesus:"

*"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said:  
"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

Mark 8 v 34

It is the same for us all - "whoever". I am to deny myself, take up my cross and follow him. Every Christian is called to costly sacrifice. Denying yourself does not mean tweaking your behaviour here and there. It is saying "No" to your deepest sense of who you are, for the sake of Christ. To take up a cross is to declare your life (as you have known it) forfeit. It is laying down your life for the very reason that your life, it turns out, is not yours at all. It belongs to Jesus. He made it. And through his death he has bought it."<sup>6</sup>

I might add here that these struggles with our identity, if we are in Christ, are only temporary too. Be encouraged. There will come a day when everything, including our identities, will be restored.

*"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."*

(1 Peter 5:10 ESV)

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpt From: Sam Allberry. "Is God Anti-Gay?." iBooks. <https://itunes.apple.com/au/book/is-god-anti-gay/id722776261?mt=11>

## **Conclusion**

We've covered a lot this morning, and no doubt there is still much more that could be said. But I hope that you have at least gained a greater confidence in the Bible's ability and authority to speak in to the struggles of our world, and a greater confidence that at a fundamental level, Jesus Christ himself is the solution to all the brokenness and damage that we see around us.

Let's pray and ask God to strengthen us with this knowledge, and give us the courage to proclaim Jesus in the world.