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OUR IDENTITY CRISIS

A few years ago, Jason Black and Frances Schroeder, a couple from New York, offered to name their third child after any brand that would pay them half a million dollars. When nobody came forward, they decided to call him Zane. A year later, a gaming company offered \$10,000 to any couple who would name their child Turok, after their latest release. Nobody took the offer. One online blogger, whose personal brand was hurt because he shared the same name with a famous singer, tells expectant parents to do a domain name search before selecting a name for their child. “Could a lack of research leave your child fighting a losing battle for online visibility in the future?” he worried.¹ Long gone are the days when the only concerns new parents faced when choosing a name was the pressure of family tradition or the threat of making a choice that might eventually lead to an unfortunate nickname. It’s more complicated now. A name is no longer a name. Now it’s a brand.

Concern about your brand used to mean that you were either a cattle rancher or an advertising executive. Today ordinary job seekers, students applying for college, churches,

and even children are branding themselves. Business management expert Tom Peters seemed to have launched the personal branding trend in 1997 with an article in *Fast Company* magazine entitled “The Brand Called You.”² His message? You need to stand out from the crowd if you want to succeed.

But the real issue isn’t branding; it’s identity. When you strip away the marketing language, what you find in the typical branding exercise is really just a process of self-exploration and differentiation. *Who am I? What sets me apart from those around me? What unique value do I bring to the table that others do not?* These are questions of identity, and identity is the question of our age.

In a way, the quest for identity is really a question about our differences. Difference adds value. Yet our differences also divide us. In terms of human experience, the differences between us can be both a blessing and a curse. We live in a day when nearly every sector of our culture seems to be embroiled in an identity crisis. Its contours are revealed in the fault lines that divide us from one another: race, class, age, sex, religion, politics, and nationality. This conflict has disoriented us, both as individuals and as a culture. “After centuries of women living alongside men, and of the races living adjacent to one another, even if only notionally, our rigidly enforced gender and racial lines are finally breaking down,” *New York Times* critic-at-large Wesley Morris observes.³ “There’s a sense of fluidity and permissiveness and a smashing of binaries. We’re all becoming one another.”⁴

But then again, maybe we’re not. Morris goes on to note the widespread criticism aimed at Rachel Dolezal—president of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

chapter in Spokane, Washington—who self-identified as an African American, despite the fact that both her birth parents were white. “Some people called her ‘transracial,’” Morris explained. “Others found insult in her masquerade, particularly when the country’s attention was being drawn, day after day, to how dangerous it can be to have black skin.”⁵ This was the same year that former Olympian Bruce Jenner changed his name and sexual identity and became Caitlin. Unlike Dolezal, who was mostly criticized for claiming an identity that differed from her birth identity, Jenner was widely praised.

WHAT SHAPES IDENTITY?

Dolezal and Jenner epitomize our current identity crisis, not only because their drama unfolded within the familiar spheres of race and sex, but also because they raise a number of fundamental questions about identity. *How is it formed? Is identity something that is given to us by somebody else, or do we get to determine who and what we are? Can our identity be changed? If so, under what circumstances?*

Race and sex are not the only factors that shape our identity. Location, family, religious persuasion, occupation, and even personal interests play a role. Many of the factors that influence our sense of identity are beyond our control. We do not originate ourselves. Someone else gives birth to us and names us. We do not get to choose our physiology from a menu of possible options—though the day may be approaching when parents may be able to do so for their children. We inherit our features from the family gene pool. We can change our place of residence once we come of age, but our most formative years

are lived in locations and under conditions that are determined for us by others.

At the same time, we do contribute to a certain extent to this overall project of identity formation. Every day, we make choices that lead to experiences that can change the way we see ourselves. We also have a capacity for change. We may be born with black hair, but we can dye it blond or even pink if we choose. We may alter aspects of our physiology through surgery or prosthetics. We can move the family to a new location or forsake the family altogether. We can change our occupation or even our name.

Yet Rachel Dolezal's attempt to self-identify as an African American and Bruce Jenner's self-transformation into Caitlin make it clear that we do not all agree on which aspects of our identity are fixed and which are alterable. Many who condemned Dolezal affirmed Jenner, arguing that the categories of race and sex were radically different. "Science has largely discarded the idea that racial differences beyond superficial physical features have any basis in genetics," transgender author Evan Urqhart observed.⁶ "Whether men and women differ more profoundly than racial groups do remains a somewhat contested question, but science continues to be done that supports the idea of gender differences within the human brain, while the possibility of such differences existing between races has been roundly rejected."⁷

On the other hand, *Federalist* contributor D. C. McAllister took the opposite view. "The celebration of Jenner 'becoming a woman' is a fantasy," McAllister complained.⁸ "It's artificial. It's make-believe. It's not authentic at all. It's a mirage. Jenner has always fantasized that he's a woman, dreaming of the

possibilities of becoming what he imagines himself to be. But possibilities in life are only fantasies when they aren't rooted in something real. You can't become a woman without being a girl, complete with XX chromosomes that determine our sex."⁹

McAllister's objection was social as much as it was biological. She argued the Jenner's male physiology and personal history removed him from the foundational experiences that shape female identity. Interestingly, those who criticized Dolezal for claiming to be a black woman did so for similar reasons. They argued that the root problem with her claim was not merely her ancestry but her inability to truly share in the African American experience.

Beyond these larger social questions, our cultural identity crisis is sparked by the more basic challenge of understanding and interacting with one another. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen explains, "We all know we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups." This kind of depersonalization is common. Tannen continues, "It's a natural tendency, since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn't be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn't predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are."¹⁰ Identity then is not just about how we see ourselves. It is inevitably bound up with the way that others see us. This means identity is as much a function of a particular role, title, or task as it is a function of our sense of self. Some aspects of identity are more a matter of perception than being.

But Tannen warns that this tendency toward assumption and categorization, although necessary, also lends itself to oversimplification. "Generalizations, while capturing similarities,

obscure differences,” she explains. “Everyone is shaped by innumerable influences such as ethnicity, religion, class, race, age, profession, the geographic regions they and their relatives have lived in, and many other group identities—all mingled with individual personality and predilection.”¹¹

Some aspects of identity are contextually fluid. Not only can they change over time, they may “change” many times in the same day, depending upon our circumstances. The teacher who instructs her fourth grade students in the morning, eats lunch in the faculty lounge with her colleagues at noon, and then goes home to her spouse at night is the same person in each instance. But she does not interact with everyone in the same way or under the exact same identity. To her students, she is an authority. To her colleagues, she is a professional peer. To her spouse, she is a friend and lover. If she happens to have a son or daughter in class, it becomes even more complex. She may relate to her child as a teacher during school hours yet as a mother after school. The nature of her interests, obligations, and interactions differ depending upon the context.

For the person of faith, there is an additional question: What are we to make of God’s role in all this? If the core of our human identity results from having been created in the image of God, it cannot be so easily thrown off. We may be able to alter or relabel some aspects of our identity, but in doing so we may put ourselves as individuals and as a culture in peril. The fact that we *can* change these things does not automatically mean that we *should*. When we take all these factors into account, the differences between us can be traced to three primary influences: divine design, human culture, and our sinful disposition.

THREE KINDS OF DIFFERENT

Divine Design

The first of these three is the most foundational. Our identity is grounded in God, and God has designed us to be different. Genesis 1:27 illustrates this fact, stating that humanity was created male and female. This biological distinction (which we will discuss in more detail in chapter 7) is the first identity marker mentioned in Scripture. It is especially significant that this physical distinction is mentioned in conjunction with the image of God. We do not reflect God *despite* our differences but *through* them. Difference is not the only thing emphasized in the creation account. Commonality is also affirmed. There is a common origin of both the man and the woman. They both come from the same source. Although the specific details of their creation differ, it is God who creates (Gen. 2:21–22). They also share the same basic nature. Adam acknowledges as much when he characterizes Eve as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). There is a diversity that was expressed in unity of action as the two join together in one flesh (2:24). Additionally, they shared the same general calling. Adam and Eve reflect the divine image by exercising a shared dominion over creation (1:26). Bible scholar J. Richard Middleton has called this “the royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world.”¹²

Human Culture

Although men and women have been designed by God to be different biologically, most of our differences do not grow out of nature. Instead, our differences are reflected in markers

such as language, values, beliefs, and customs. The word we use to refer to this second category of differences is *culture*. You don't have to go across the sea to know the difference culture makes. You might need only to cross the street. Our differences do not need to be extreme or even exotic to create cultural tension. I (John) grew up in a suburb of Detroit and lived on a block that few would consider to be culturally diverse today. My friends were white, middle-class kids like me who attended the same school and spoke the same language. We watched the same television shows (there were only three major channels in those days) and listened to the same kind of music. Yet it often seemed to me that there was a world of differences between us. I thought of my friend Larry as "Italian," even though he couldn't speak a word of the language. His parents sometimes played bocce ball. My friend Kevin was "Polish" because his family ate kielbasa. The bully next door called me a "Kraut" because my last name is German in origin. There were religious and social differences, too. Most of my neighbors were Roman Catholic. They had neatly manicured lawns, while ours was weedy and unkempt. If you looked carefully enough, you could find hundreds of little distinctions that set us all apart from one another and sometimes even set us against each other.

These differences seemed to increase exponentially after I entered junior high and high school. There, I encountered greasers, freaks, jocks, nerds, and band geeks. Although a sociologist would have said that we were all part of the same socioeconomic class, I saw it differently. The hip kids all seemed to live on the other side of an eleven-mile road. They wore the most stylish clothes and lived in cooler houses. Today, sociologists would probably say that we all were part of the "majority"

culture. But back then, the majority depended upon which group you happened to be with, and most of the time I felt like an outsider or someone on the margins. The differences between us all were matters of culture.

Culture, in the broad sense, is a social construct. It is a *construct* in the sense that it is not a function of our biology. Culture is not a product of instinct or DNA, though it often feels as if it is. It is a *social* construct because it is something that must be learned and transmitted. “Culture, although it becomes for man a ‘second nature,’ remains something quite different from nature precisely because it is the product of man’s own activity,” explains sociologist Peter Berger.¹³ “Culture must be continuously produced and reproduced by man. Its structures are, therefore, inherently precarious and predestined to change.”¹⁴ Culture shapes the way we see ourselves as individuals by making the group our primary point of reference. “Society, therefore, is not only an outcome of culture, but a necessary condition of the latter. Society structures, distributes, and coordinates the world building activities of men. And only in society can the products of those activities persist over time.”¹⁵ This is human work, but God’s hand is also in it. According to Acts 17:26, the God who made the world also “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (ESV). In this scenario, God is the prime mover. He has laid out the board and set the pieces in motion. But this is not the detached god of deism. Quite the opposite. The point is that both the unity and the diversity of human culture originate with God. Each is a part of the outworking of His plan. But there is also a dark side to this picture. A survey of history soon

reveals a world of upheaval, struggle, and suffering implied in these words. When one nation displaces another, it is usually through violent means, often fueled by cultural differences. Human society's path of expansion from a single family into a multitude of tribes, peoples, languages, and nations has been a trail of tears as much as it has been a path of glory.

Sinful Disposition

The differences that set us apart may also spring from a third source. God's design and His intent for us to create culture are not the only factors. Some of our differences result from the entrance of sin into human experience. We should not overlook the fact that the first biblical record of cultural differentiation between people can be traced to an act of rebellion against God. Genesis 11 describes the confusion of languages and subsequent scattering that took place when the Tower of Babel fell (Gen. 11:1–9). This was an act of divine judgment upon those who refused to obey God's command to fill the earth (1:28). Instead, they stayed in place and attempted to build a kind of stairway to heaven that was really a monument to their own pride. Unity is not always a good thing, especially when it is fueled by sinful ambition. The introduction of cultural differences in the form of various languages was God's way of ensuring that this first human coalition would not be able to reassemble (see Gen. 11:6–8).

Babel bluntly reminds us that in addition to considering the benefits that come to us because of our differences, we must also reckon how sin affects our response to these same differences. Although many of our differences have their ground in God's design and plan for humanity, the presence of sin sug-

gests that these same differences have as much potential to divide us as they do to enrich us. We are just as liable to find an encounter with a different culture as irritating as it is interesting. Sin can also cause us to see differences where none should exist. This sinful differentiation is the sort that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” This is a differentiation that is driven by pride. It is the dark ambition to draw distinctions that make us feel superior to others and lord it over them.

This is why the Bible speaks of our need to be *recreated* in God’s image. This is accomplished through the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God and the one who is supreme over all creation. He is the Head over all the church, and it is through His cross that we have been reconciled to God and to one another (Col. 1:15–20). Our foundational identity in Christ provides the basis for a shared experience of salvation and a common calling. This identity reconciles us in the midst of our differences. It is an identity that creates a context in which we can serve God through those differences.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the church. God has structured the church for difference. The things that distinguish us from one another make the church what it is. God has given the manifestation of the Holy Spirit to each one in the body of Christ “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit that indwells us is the same, and we share the common objective of mutual edification, though our gifts differ. Both our nature and gifting are traceable to God’s design. This is the great strength of the body of Christ. We are not all the same.

ALL TOGETHER DIFFERENT

There are differences in gifts, modes of service, and in the ways that we function (1 Cor. 12:4–6). There are also differences in cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and perspectives. Just as we are a community with a variety of gifts, we are a people drawn from every tribe, language, and nation (Rev. 5:9).

Our differences are more than cosmetic. Just as we all do not look the same, we all do not think the same. It is the knowledge that we have been designed for difference and have been joined to one another in Jesus Christ that enables us to look for the added value that comes to the community of believers through our differences. The obligation we have to love one another provides the motivation for disciplining ourselves to work against our sinful tendency to marginalize those unlike us. The church provides a context where we can recover from our individualistic nearsightedness and learn how to live in community. Our interconnectedness to one another in the body of Christ and the equipping of the Holy Spirit teach us to “have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25 esv). Through Jesus Christ, God the Father will achieve what those who attempted to build the Tower of Babel could not. In the fullness of time, He will “unite all things” in Christ (Eph. 1:10 esv).

A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL?

Diversity is good, but it isn’t always comfortable. Adapting to the challenges that come with our differences is not easy. One of the greatest problems we face is the tendency to minimize the trouble our diversity often creates for us. Because we live in an age that values diversity, we tend to romanticize it. “In this age of the shrinking planet and the global village, we all

know the world is composed of an enormous variety of peoples and that their beliefs and practices differ from our own in every conceivable manner,” cultural communications expert Craig Storti observes.¹⁶ “Cultural diversity is a truism, even a cliché, of our time.”¹⁷ As a result, we expect our encounters with the “other” to be like a Disney ride: relatively brief, mostly entertaining, and with minimal to no discomfort. We expect some differences in appearance and style, but we also believe that in the end everyone will be singing the same song. It turns out that we are wrong. Our well-meaning naïveté does not prepare us for the common irritation and emotional exhaustion that comes with dealing with our differences. The expectation that we are basically on the same page with those who are not like us keeps us from preparing to face our differences. We assume that everyone thinks like we do and shares our most important values. When we learn they don’t, we are shocked, dismayed, and often offended.

We have been conditioned since childhood to operate this way. The centripetal force of every human culture pressures us to conform. Divergence from the accepted standards of the group is discouraged in every culture and is often punished. Although the phrase “majority culture” is mostly used pejoratively today, it is the normal bent of every culture to desire that its values, preferences, and practices be the standard for others. The fundamental assumption of all human interaction is that everybody sees the world just as we do. “This assumption, which we are rarely, if ever, aware of, is the foundation and operative principle of much of human behavior,” Storti explains. “Indeed, if all of us did not live by this conviction, most human interaction would not be possible.”¹⁸

ALL TOGETHER DIFFERENT

Once we understand our own cultural assumptions and recognize the problems created by our fallen human nature, we begin to understand why some of our most painful experiences take place in the church. We find that the same differences that God designed to add value to us often divide us. It is no accident that the church's first major conflict fell along cultural lines. This ethnic dispute erupted when a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1). The Corinthian church divided over the way its members had been gifted by God. Some began to develop a sense of inferiority, believing their gifts were less valuable than others' (1 Cor. 12:15–16). Others, however, felt superior because they believed they had been given more prominent gifts, and they even excluded those they deemed inferior (1 Cor. 12:21). There were party differences. Some aligned themselves with key leaders in the church in a way that dismissed others (1 Cor. 1:12). There were also class differences in the early church, which caused it to divide along the lines of the “haves” and the “have nots.” The wealthy were shown special favor, while the poor were treated with contempt (James 2:1–4).

What is the solution? The first step is to recognize that our identity is anchored but not static. Identity is multi-dimensional and contextually fluid. It begins with what is given to us by God, both in terms of nature and through the Spirit. Yet it is also shaped through ordinary human development and personal experience. Because our sense of identity is subject to various conflicting influences, we must be discerning about which voices we allow to name us. And since we are talking about *human* identity, we must be prepared to face the collateral

damage that sin has wreaked upon this aspect of our nature. We must also be willing to engage the subsequent struggle that comes from dealing with others whose sense of identity has been similarly affected.

Before we can deal with our identity crisis, we will need to break out of our pattern of denial. The presence of sin in human experience guarantees that our common diversity is both beautiful and messy. Difference adds value, but it also creates problems. We have mixed feelings about the things that set us apart from one another. Sometimes we deny that our differences matter. At other times we draw battle lines because of them. Our differences are complex and more subtle than we often recognize. But the good news is that the things that distinguish us from one another do not have to set us against each other. The work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit enable us to be many and one at the same time. This is what it means to be the church. We are not altogether different. We are all *together* different. The various parts of the body of Christ have been knit together into one. We do not have to work through our identity crisis alone. The God who has called us by name from eternity past has also sent Jesus Christ to die on our behalf in order to redeem our identity. He has given us the Holy Spirit to remind us of both our calling and our equipping. Because of this, we are able to say with the apostle Paul, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:10 ESV).

Questions for Reflection

1. Where does your sense of identity come from?
How much control does a person have over their own identity? How much should they have?
2. How much of our identity should be fluid, and how much should be fixed?
3. How do other people shape our sense of who we are? When is this good, and when is it problematic?
4. Most Christians recognize that cultural diversity strengthens the church. Why, then, do we struggle with cultural diversity so much?
5. What challenges come with diversity? What are the limits for diversity in the church?