

WHO AM I?

ROOTING YOUR
IDENTITY IN THE
IMAGE OF GOD





College can be an anxious time. You have finally escaped the box in which your high school had placed you, where you were labelled a certain type of person. You no longer need to be categorized by that box. But who are you?

You also have breathing space from family obligations and expectations. You can reinvent yourself outside of the way your parents or siblings have defined you. But who are you?

Just about everybody asks you, "What's your major?" as if you know what you will do for the rest of your life. It's a daunting task to choose a major because it identifies you.

Yes, this is the time to ask yourself, "Who am I?"

College is a time of real wrestling with this big question. For the first time in your life, you have the freedom and responsibility to decide for yourself who you are. Many college students try to find themselves by partying or sleeping around. They try to reinvent themselves but merely find that they are conforming to new destructive patterns of pleasure-seeking.

Some of your peers seem self-confident with who they are and how that influences what they do. But the reality is that all college students are struggling with this issue, no matter how well they appear to have it all together. You are not alone.

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And, thankfully, you are also not left alone in figuring out who you are either. To answer your personal question, “Who am I?”, the best place to start is with how God answers the larger question, “What is a human being?”

In the first chapter of Genesis, we read,

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:26-28, TNIV).

The wonder of being a human being is that you are created in the “Image of God” (*Imago Dei* in Latin). However, sin has cracked the image in humanity so that we have deviated from the original plan for our development, no longer living out the wholeness and beauty of being image bearers. The Gospel places those with faith in Jesus Christ back on course toward God’s intended goal for us—to be fully human, glorifying God as the *Imago Dei*.

CREATED TO REPRESENT

In the ancient, Near Eastern cultural context within which the book of Genesis was first read, the idea of the “image of a god” was familiar. It was commonly believed that humanity was created as an afterthought to do the work the gods no longer wanted to do. The gods would bestow their image to kings who would rule people to serve the gods’ desires. The distorted worldview of this creation story created a social order that was inherently unjust, exploiting the mass of human beings to the benefit of the powerful few.

In contrast, God reveals that *all of humanity* (both “male and female”) possesses the dignity the ancients bestowed only on kings—we are *all* created in the image of God. Notice how the first chapter of Genesis echoes this concept: God commands all humans to “rule.” J. Richard Middleton, in his book *The Liberating Image*, says this “serves to elevate the dignity of the human race with a noble status in the world.”

Therefore, as God’s image-bearer, you have dignity. Our culture’s warped standards for beauty, talent, celebrity, wealth, and power have no claim to a person’s value. Each person has a distinct ability to radiate the infinite, divine image. When we look at the vast tapestry of the human race, with all our particular gifts and talents, all of our quirkiness and idiosyncrasies, we see the reflection of God! *Together* we shine forth the glory of God. Humbly remembering that our dignity is *derived from* God,

we can affirm that *each* and *every* human being (including the person in the mirror) is created in the image of God, awaiting full restoration.

The image of God in humanity is cracked because we treat some humans with less dignity than others. Our culture looks down upon the old, the weak, those who don't fit in, and those who do not contribute to our agenda. But when we deny the dignity of others made in God's image, we dishonour God.

Jesus Christ came, however, to redeem and to serve humans so that we can experience the fullness of what it means to be the image of God. The answer to "Who am I?" is disclosed as we participate in the body of Christ, cooperating with Christ in his ongoing reconciliation project for all things (Colossians 1:15-20), serving those who are different from us, who have different views from us, and respectfully proclaiming the Gospel of restoration to each one.

CREATED TO CULTIVATE

The human race is mandated to "subdue the earth" (Genesis 1:28). We do that when we "cultivate it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15, NASB). We are to cultivate the world: not only are we to plant crops, we are to create cultures—develop civilization, build bridges, compose music, conceive new cuisines, and invent and improve things. The human race was never meant to be stagnant. We were created

with great potential and placed in a cosmos of great potentiality.

In his *Heaven is a Place on Earth*, Michael Wittmer writes that "God has humbly chosen to complete and care for his creation through you." Selecting a major is a discerning process—learning how you uniquely reflect God's creativity and character, coming to know how you've been gifted to take the raw materials God has given to craft culture. We find joy and fulfillment when we live purposefully as the persons God has made us to be, working interdependently with others in response to this cultural mandate. This is a constant discovery—your entire life will continue to be a deeper unearthing of your contribution to the Kingdom of God, bringing glory to God.

CREATED TO RELATE

God does not tell us that our identity as image-bearers is individualistic. God tells humanity to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). To be the image of God means to be a part of the human family, relating to one another as interdependent persons in community, building societal institutions: families, churches, schools, clubs, trade associations, cities, and governments.

God is a Trinity, an eternal loving relationship. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in a social relationship *with* one another, *for* one another,

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and *in* one another. The ancients called this “*perichoresis*,” from a word root similar to our word “choreography.” Tim Keller writes in *The Reason for God*: “Each [of the divine persons of the Trinity] voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them ... That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love.”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ holds this purpose for those who follow him: To unite us in this *perichoretic* love, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21). God is love (1 John 4:16) and we are created in God’s *perichoretic* image. We are more human when we love. We are more human in community.

The “cracks” in the Image of God can be seen in how broken our relationships are. Scot McKnight writes, “The Eikon (image) of God cracked and its glory quickly faded. Why? Because what was designed for one purpose started to unravel. Arms that Adam and Eve previously used for an embrace were now being used to push God and others away” (*Embracing Grace*). In a culture that has sunk deeply into individualism, the Gospel of Jesus Christ restores the relational nature of human beings. Remember, Jesus told us that the “greatest commandment” is to love God and to love others (Mark 12:30-31).

North America’s individualistic culture is displayed in our consumerism. In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein correctly called corporate marketers the “brokers of meaning.” They seek to define you through the place you live, the image-based fashions you wear, or the latest tech toys you own. Young people may think they’re above the marketing machine’s influence, but Rob Walker’s new book *Buying In* shows that they are only kidding themselves. In fact, marketers are cashing in on the young generation’s desire to be individualists, promoting products by casting them as anti-corporate. Don’t allow

consumerism to feed your individualism and thus divert you from loving God and others and from cultivating God’s creation.

North American church life reflects this consumerist culture. Many youth groups are consumer-driven, doing little beyond responding to the impulses of young people. Now that you are in college, it is time to actively participate in the whole life of the church, knowing others and getting to be known, seeking to serve rather than to be served, finding your place in the community that is impacting the culture with the Kingdom of God.

RESTORING THE IMAGE

Each of us struggles to find our identity and significance. With abundant mercy, God does not leave us as “cracked” people.

Jesus Christ restores the Image of God in humanity. *He* is the Image after which *each of us* was made, and now He is redeeming us back to that Image. Christ “is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). Most of us read that and think that it refers to the Jesus’ divinity. However, not only is Jesus fully God, he is fully human. Jesus’ mission is to restore humanity to our original trajectory. Since Jesus as the head of the human race fulfills the mandate to be the image of God, we who follow him can fulfill that mandate as well.

Paul explains that as we yield to Jesus Christ, we “are being transformed into the same image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The promise for those who are called into a relationship with God, those who willingly decide to love God in Jesus, is that we will experience ongoing transformation. Both the goodness and the difficulties of life, from the exhilaration of first love to the tragedy of when parents divorce, are used by the sovereign

God to mold us into the image of Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God. That is our destiny, finally arriving at what God intended all along. We will be God's representatives on earth, in harmonious relationship with the Trinity and with our fellow human beings, continuing to carry out that original cultural mandate.

We are not transformed as individuals. We need to be interconnected with a faith community that walks with us toward this shared destiny, where we all contribute and experience encouragement for the journey. The eschatological future is not about persons experiencing individualistic bliss in some ethereal heavenly realm. Some day, God and God's people will live in harmony on a redeemed earth.

So, "Who am I?" Root your identity in the Image of God. Ask yourself, "What can I do to connect with God and with a community so that we can interdependently live our purpose as God's representatives on earth, fulfilling the cultural mandate and positively moving toward God's destiny for us as the human race?" ☐



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