

Who Am I? How Should I Live?— Rethinking Identity in Christ



by ALEXANDER C. THERMENOS

This article is about a subject that is often more complex in practice than in print: *identity*. To give you a sense of what's at stake in a Christian discussion of identity, I will begin with a series of questions that bring out some of the nuances we need to consider: How should Christians approach the question of identity? Specifically, when we think, talk, and write about personal identity, should we limit our discussion to what it means that we are *in Christ*? Is that the only aspect of our identity that matters after we've become Christians? If you were to describe your identity, how comfortable would you be to go beyond your in-Christ identifier? Would you include your heritage, ethnicity, life experiences, and personality in a description of your identity? Do you feel discomfort in giving that much weight to such "earthly" considerations? If so, you are not alone. It's common in sermons, blog posts, and popular Christian books to limit identity to one essential category of being a creature before God and in—or not in—Christ. We often contend that God considers other identifiers as not truly identifying and that we should do likewise. This contention then shapes the way we think, write, speak,

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and counsel about identity in ways that can limit our ability to be helpful. In what follows, I offer an alternative.

Here's a preview of what's ahead. First, we explore what we mean by the question of identity: the "Who am I?" question. We aim to understand what we mean by this question so we can know whether we are answering it adequately. This sets the stage to evaluate popular secular and evangelical messaging about identity. We will see that neither option gives us all we need to answer the question of who a person is, because both think about identity in ways that are reductive. From there, we'll consider how we ought to think about identity. There are many ways to go about this, but one especially helpful option is to follow John Frame's approach to what is known as *epistemology*—the study of knowledge—in his book *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (DKG)*. This approach is helpful because getting one's identity right means *knowing* oneself rightly. Therefore, getting a clear understanding of knowledge can help us more accurately understand identity. After that, we'll look to Colossians 3 for insight into the way "in Christ" is meant to inform the believer's identity. Finally, we will conclude with implications for how we talk about identity and what that means for ministry and the individual believer's sense of self.

Identity: What Is It?

What do we mean when we ask, "Who am I?" You might be surprised to realize how much we pack into that inquiry. Consider the questions below. They are all identity questions. Reflect on them. Personalize them. The *I* is meant to be *your* I. As you go through them, see if you can answer without touching on what it means to be you:

Where do I come from—what is my background?

Where and with whom do I belong?

Where do I fit?

What ought to be true of me, and how do I measure up?

What feelings regarding myself are fitting or appropriate?

What am I capable of—good or ill?

In what direction am I headed in life, and should I
continue that way or change course?

As you went through the list, you may have felt the gravity of the question of identity. You may have noticed that there is more than one aspect to it. Identity touches on all of those questions at once—and more! One way to think about it is to say the question of identity is a “meta-question.” It is a big question that ties together many smaller ones. You can’t answer the big question completely without the smaller questions, and you can’t answer the smaller questions without getting at that really big, ultimate question of who you are.

One implication of this is—if you answer the identity question well—you’ll have the resources to answer many, many others. Fail to answer it well, and life can become an endless maze, on a dark night, without a map. In the most extreme example, an amnesiac does not know which car he has a right to drive, which dog he has a responsibility to feed, which company he is to call employer, which person to call spouse, which house to call home. Existentially, he is lost. He is alone. To lose your sense of who you are is to be adrift at sea and unsure whether home—if there even is such a thing—is north, south, east, west, up, down, or right where one floats.¹

Philosopher Charles Taylor writes,

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.²

To undergo an identity crisis, Taylor goes on to explain, is to lose the points of reference one has used for guidance in life; it is to become unsure of the ground upon which one stands.³

1. I’m borrowing this language from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

2. *Ibid.* Taylor is here describing our experience of identity from the inside—my sense of self. We will discuss below how Scripture provides guidelines for constructing a sense of self that accords with God’s identification of each of us.

3. *Ibid.*

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