

September 8th 2002 - Practical Christianity
Image and Identity: Session 1

Identity Crisis

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

What can we learn from the many 'make over' programmes that are on television today (eg clothes, gardening, houses, DIY) about the attitudes of contemporary society to issues of image and identity?

It is often said that we live in an image obsessed society. Do you think that this is true? If so, how does it affect the way that we live?

Why do you think that people in our society find it more difficult to 'know who they are' than those who live in a more traditional society?

OUR IDENTITY

(1) Who Am I?

Unlike animals, human beings are self-aware and self-reflective. They are able to stand back and examine themselves. They naturally ask questions about their identity. They want to know: 'Who am I?' In modern society many people seem to experience severe problems regarding their identity. Many common psychological disorders are related to difficulties regarding our sense of identity, including insecurity, lack of self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, drug taking & other addictions. Our sense of identity will also affect the way that we relate to others and our ability to form friendships and relationships

(2) Identifying the Real Me

Issues of personal identity operate at various levels:

- 1 who I really am (our true identity)
- 2 who I would like to think I am (our self-deceiving identity)
- 3 who I want others to think I am (our image)

Wholeness, contentment and psychological health flow from integrating these different levels of identity. If we are not integrated we will project an image which does not correspond with our real self. It may prove an unbearable or unhealthy burden to keep up this image, and inevitably from time to time our real self will be exposed.

(3) Is There A Real Me?

The dominant postmodern ideology of today is sceptical whether there is any such thing as the 'real me.' In postmodern philosophy the Self is regarded as nothing more than an artificial cultural construct. As such we can never possess true Self-knowledge. This is very different from the teaching of the Bible. In Biblical thinking the 'real me' is generally identified as the 'heart.' The 'real me' is essentially the 'inner me' and not the image we project to others. The concept of the heart includes our character (our moral core), our temperament, our personality, and the deepest values and commitments which determine our perspective on life.

What can we learn about the heart from:

1 Sam 6v7?

Jeremiah 17v9?

Matthew 6v21?

Mark 7v21-23?

What can we learn about our Self-knowledge from *1 Corinthians 2v11?*

(4) What Factors Contribute to Our Identity?

Postmodernism rightly recognises that our identities are affected/constructed by the interplay of many factors, only some of which are in our control. We can draw our sense of identity from several sources:

- 1 from what I think (rational)
- 2 from what I feel (emotional)
- 3 from what I do (existential)
- 4 from how others treat me (experiential)

Each individual is likely to draw their personal sense of identity primarily from one of these sources. A particular culture may consider one of these sources more important than others, so that modern society (unlike the Bible) tends to regard feelings as the truest indicator of our real selves.

Personal Application: Which of these sources most contributes to your identity?

Our sense of Identity is also affected by biological, cultural and circumstantial factors, for example:

- 1 age, gender, sexual orientation
- 2 physical appearance
- 3 education, class, wealth, social position
- 4 friendships and relationships
- 5 role, job, abilities, talents
- 6 our heroes/role models
- 7 nationality & political outlook
- 8 religion

One of these factors may be dominant and provide a primary sense of identity.

Personal Application: How do any of these factors contribute to your sense of identity?

Our past experiences, especially our childhood experiences, also play a very significant part in establishing our sense of identity. Over time our sense of identity may change as our circumstances change, for example when we stop being a student, change job, get made redundant, get married, start a family, become a Christian.

Personal Application: Are you the same person you were ten years ago? How has your identity changed? In what has it remained constant?

OUR IMAGE

(1) Why do we project an Image?

Our image is the way in which we project ourselves to other people. We may project different images to different people. For example, we may wish to project a different image to our Christian friends from the image we project to our non-Christian friends. Often we project an image in order to gain acceptance or to acquire power or status.

Why do you think people feel the need to project an image to others?

How much effort does it take to project an image to others?

Why do Christians feel the need to project an image to others (whether Christians or non-Christians)?

Personal Application: Are you aware of any ways in which you project an image to others which is not your true Self? Why do you do this?

(2) Image and Hypocrisy

Our identity lacks integration when we project an image which is not consistent with our true Self. The adoption of an image which does not correspond with our true identity is the essence of hypocrisy.

Read: Matthew 15v1-11

What image were the Pharisees seeking to project?

Why do you think they were projecting an image?

Why did Jesus regard them as hypocrites

What was their true identify according to Jesus?