

# The Gospel and Culture

## Leader Guide

### SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL AND IDENTITY - Part 1



#### Big Idea

Culture shapes our sense of identity.



#### Warm Up

Imagine you're at a party and you're meeting someone for the first time. If you could only tell that person three things about yourself to introduce yourself, what would they be?

#### Instructions

This activity gets people ready to think about the subject of identity.

- If your group is small (8 to 14 people), do it all together. If it's a larger group, consider breaking people into pairs.
- After a few minutes, ask volunteers to tell the group what they would say.
- After the sharing time, help people make observations about the way we tend to identify ourselves. You could ask questions like

*"What did you notice about the kinds of things we tend to use to identify ourselves?"*

*"Why do you think that is?"*

*"What might this tell us about how we form our sense of identity?"*

*"Do you think this is something that comes naturally, or do you think it's something we learn?"*

#### Key Takeaway

Session 1 and 2 focus on the relationship between our identity and the gospel. The "Who Are You?" activity is part of this first session, which is designed to open our eyes to just how deeply ideas impact the way our culture thinks about identity also shapes the way we think.



## Pray

Before we dive in, pause and pray. Ask God to begin opening your eyes to the way that ideas shape minds, so that you can become very deliberate about allowing His truth to shape your thinking.



## Watch

Historically, a person's sense of identity was grounded in commonly-held objective categories such as

- Gender
- Parents/Family/Lineage
- Nationality/Ethnicity
- Religion

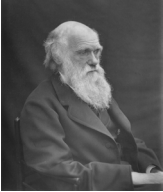
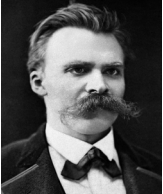


These were primarily objective categories from which a person derived their sense of identity. These things gave a person their identity.

But a shift occurred in our beliefs about where identity comes from.

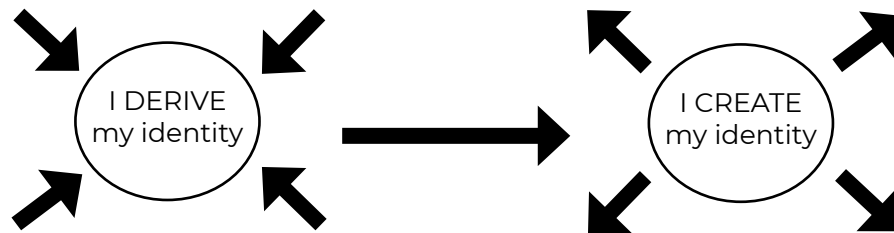
The video presents a simplified historical sketch of the development of ideas. While the picture it presents is a caricature, what it illustrates is how ideas build on other ideas.

By formulating his theory of natural selection, Darwin produced an explanatory model for the evolution of all life from a common ancestor that did not require God as Creator. Declaring that everything could be explained as the result of fixed laws stripped the world of meaning, since fixed laws didn't operate for any reason. That meant life on earth was not intended; it just occurred by chance and necessity.

It's important to see that the idea of "self-creation" is a direct implication of Darwin's theory. Man can't live without meaning, and if there's no God existing outside the world to give us our meaning, then the only alternative is for the world to create its own meaning.

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| <p>Charles Darwin</p>       | <p>“ <b>EVERYTHING</b> is the result of fixed laws.”</p>   |
| <p>Friedrich Nietzsche</p>  | <p>“God is dead...we want to be those who give themselves their own law, those who <b>CREATE</b> themselves.”</p>  |
| <p>John Stuart Mill</p>     | <p>“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the <b>INDIVIDUAL</b> is sovereign.”</p>   |
| <p>Michel Foucault</p>     | <p>“From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to <b>CREATE OURSELVES</b> as a work of art”</p> |

**The Identity Paradigm Shift:** Over the past 100-150 years, there’s been a slow but steady shift in how people think about forming their sense of identity.



The development and application of ideas doesn't happen in a straight line or all at once. Ideas capture cultures in stages. So, we still may see evidence of people deriving their sense of identity from things outside themselves, like family, career, or nationality. In other cases, the shift in creating identity is clearly taking hold, especially in areas related to sexuality and spirituality.

**Consider This:** A recent Barna survey found that 91% of adults and 76% of practicing Christians agreed with this statement: "The best way to find yourself is by looking **WITHIN YOURSELF.**"

[Source: "The State of Discipleship: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with The Navigators", barna.com, 2015]

*The heart is **DECEITFUL** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?  
Jeremiah 17:9*



## Reflect and Apply

1. Where do you see Nietzsche's and Foucault's beliefs about "self-creation" at work in our world today? And how do you think this could be creating problems?

The idea of self-creation permeates our culture. But some group members may have difficulty seeing the connections between the historical progression of ideas from Darwin to Foucault and the day-to-day realities of culture.

If no one has any ideas or answers:

- Remind the group of the examples from the video of the "cat-woman" and the old man who wanted to identify as 20 years younger than he really was. These are both excellent illustrations of how people are giving priority to their inner thoughts and feelings about themselves over the real facts found in the physical world.
- Help people think of other examples by asking, "Where else do we see people in our culture ignoring the facts about physical reality in favour of how they feel about themselves?"

2. What's appealing about the idea of looking within to find our "true self"?

Self-creation is at the very heart of our sin nature. Satan tempted Adam and Eve with the lure of self-creation in the garden.

Gaining "the knowledge of good and evil" meant more than just knowing something about it: It meant gaining the knowledge to determine and declare what was "good" and "evil" for themselves. They would "become like God", assuming a right to do something that belonged to God alone.

In recognizing this, we should be wary to assume that because we're followers of Christ that this desire for "self-creation" has gone away. Though redeemed, we still wrestle with our sin nature that wills to be free of God's law.

Careful reflection about the ideas that surround us in the culture is so important. Our natural, sinful inclination is to accept them. We won't be free from the lies of culture by default. Therefore, we have the warnings of Scripture:

- *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2).*
- *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).*
- *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends upon human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).*

### 3. What are the dangers to me in trying to create my own identity?

We're spiritually blind. Apart from God's truth, the Bible says that we're captive to Satan's deceptions (2 Timothy 2:26) and darkened in our own understanding (Ephesians 4:18). This means that whatever identity we create for ourselves will be a false identity at its core.

Consequently, the longer you live with a false identity, the more difficult it can be to accept the truth about yourself when it's presented to you. Maybe this is one of the reasons why children are more open to receiving the gospel than adults.

Help your group think about how creating our identity (i.e. "self-creation") contributes to a spiritual "lostness": *"Think of some of the things people form their identities around (for example, career, children, money, sexuality, community, etc.). What are some of the spiritual dangers that anchoring our identity to these things can present?"*

**Note:** The connections between identity formation and LGBT+ activism may become immediately obvious. Since these can be very sensitive and personal issues for some people, don't let raising the subject of LGBT+ issues turn your discussion time into a rant session. Remind group members that the purpose of the study and discussion time is for reflecting on how ideas impact our own thinking, not complaining about the ideas that others have.

### 4. Is there ever a time where I can evaluate my own gifts, talents, and abilities as a part of forming my sense of identity?

Not all of the day-to-day categories that we identify ourselves with in the world are necessarily false or wrong. Clearly, God made us to live individual lives in the world, distinct from other people. For example, it isn't false for me to identify as a man (as opposed to a woman), a father (as opposed to a mother), or as Canadian (as opposed to American), etc.

The key to using such earthly identifiers is that we view them through a biblical

worldview. We recognize the legitimacy of categories like sex/gender, race, vocation, or nationality according to their relationship to God and his creation purpose for us.

5. What does Jeremiah 17:9 imply about our search for meaning and true self-understanding? What does the Bible mean by “heart?” Read the passages below to dig deeper.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

1. Deuteronomy 10:12
2. Proverbs 2:1-2
3. Romans 1:21
4. Ephesians 1:18
5. Isaiah 6:9-10
6. Matthew 9:4
7. Matthew 15:19
8. 2 Timothy 2:22
9. 1 Peter 1:22

Before answering this question, take time to clarify what the Bible means by “heart” by having the group read the Bible verses. People usually interpret the Bible’s reference to “heart” as our feelings or emotions. The true biblical picture of “heart”, however, is much broader than this. It encompasses our entire being, including our desires, our will, and our intellect. It may be thought of as the organizing principle or centre of our entire being.

Have group members to look up and read aloud the following passages:

- *And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 10:12).*
- *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding (Proverbs 2:1-2).*
- *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).*
- *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you (Ephesians 1:18).*
- *He said, “Go and tell this people:  
‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’  
Make the heart of this people calloused;  
make their ears dull  
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9-10)*

- *And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?” (Matthew 9:4)*
- *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders (Matthew 15:19).*
- *Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Timothy 2:22).*
- *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).*

### **Key Takeaway**

Jeremiah 17:9 speaks of the unreliability and inability of our hearts to discern or desire God’s truth. Therefore, the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to help us not only understand, but also want the truth found in God’s Word. That’s why Jesus called Him the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

The deceptiveness of our hearts, therefore, means that whatever our feelings, experiences, or even our own understanding may be, we must first and foremost evaluate each against God’s true Word before we can accept or trust them as being reliable.



## Renew your Mind

### Memorize

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?  
Jeremiah 17:9*

### Pray

Commit yourself in prayer this week to asking God for a renewed mind. Ask him to begin the work of exposing any false ideas about identity that you may have unknowingly adopted from the culture. Then ask the Holy Spirit to begin renewing your mind according to God’s true word. To help you get started, you can read through the verses that follow.

### Meditate

Begin each day this week reflecting on one of the following passages relating to our identity in Christ:

1. *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9).*

2. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is anew creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:17).*
3. *For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading you to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15).*
4. *Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).*
5. *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:7-8).*



## Connect With Culture

Video: Watch the **Oprah video** ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLXvwH8\\_u0A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLXvwH8_u0A)) this week and think about the questions. Your group will review these together in the next session.

1. How does this woman's description of where she has shifted in her search for finding identity illustrate the cultural shift we observed in searching inside vs. outside ourselves for our sense of identity?
2. What makes sense about this woman's reasons for shifting her focus in identity formation?
3. Why might people find her solution appealing?
4. Why does her solution ultimately fail?