

Week 1

Identity, Human Dignity and God's Authority of Love

At Hope we often talk about **matter** and **manner** - this is where we're looking for unity, not uniformity of thought during these small group discussions. We should expect a range of thoughts on various topics, because our personality, experience, friends & family, upbringing, etc. all come into play as we shape our thoughts. Let's remember we all need Jesus and his grace is sufficient to cover each of us and our struggles, past or present.

How can we have a conversation that can honor God, the bible and each other?
Can we challenge ourselves to use this time to learn, listen and grow together?

? Authority structures are all around us. As a group, list ten relationships in our culture that have authority structures. Find some post it notes, or have someone note these for later. (boss/employee, parent/child, law enforcement/community, etc.)

Leader's Note: Realize that Genesis 1 and 2 will be relied upon at various points. Don't feel like you need to do an exhaustive study of it this week. Certain passages from these passages will serve as primary Scriptures in later studies.

This week we will look at a variety of authoritative structures and how they shape our beliefs regarding identity, dignity and love.

In the Beginning

Genesis 1:26-31 (potentially cf. Genesis 1:1-1:26, 2:1-25)

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind 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."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ 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."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

? Looking at Genesis 1-2, who does God reveal himself to be? What can we confidently say it means for males and females to be created in the image and likeness of God?

Possible answers: Creator/creative, Caretakers, Bring/maintain order, Worker, Finisher, Loving, Sacrificial, Physical, Spiritual, Sexed, etc.

? Human dignity by today's basic definition involves value, worth and respect toward one another. Looking at Genesis 1-2, are there similarities to today's view of dignity? Where does God's Word confront some of the current authorities of cultural views? What makes this tension of Scripture and cultural beliefs difficult to navigate?

Possible answers: Image and likeness of God take their cues from Scripture. Typically, human dignity is defined by cultural authorities--social, political, entertainment, news, local, national, international, etc. The culture has gotten more polarized and louder when it comes to what constitutes human dignity. The culture used to take more cues from the church and it does so sparingly, if at all. Our culture dislikes being told what to do (resistance to any/all authority structures. Human authorities have failed. People give little credence to the Bible/Church/Christians, or less in the past years/generation.

Authority Structures

Romans 13:1-2

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

John 19:10-11

¹⁰ "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

? Return to the authority structures shared in the opening question. Let's think through overall views in the last few years. Do you have additional authority structures to add to the discussion at this point?

(1) which authority structures have garnered an INCREASED respect in the last few years?

(2) which have garnered a DECREASE in respect?

(3) which have remained about the SAME?

Which list is the longest? Why do you think that is the case?

Leader's note: This could be a general discussion, post it notes, mobile whiteboard on a shared screen, whatever you think will work best for your small group for discussion.

(List Relationships from Opening Question)	Increasing Respect	Same Respect	Decreasing Respect

Possible answers: Increased: any? Maybe health care workers, teachers

Decreased: police, politicians, cable news outlets, evangelicals, parents, church

SAME: Maybe teachers, parents, boss

I'd guess the decreased category has the largest number of entries. I could be wrong. But I'd venture to guess that most groups would have the longest list here.

? Why is our human tendency bent toward distrust in authority structures?

Possible answers: We believe and trust ourselves the most. We don't want an authority (that we're not in control of or that we're not convinced has our best interest in mind) to have control/power over us. We fear loss of power/control.

? Do you believe, in addition to esteeming the divine image of God in EVERY person, that following Biblical teaching is the MOST DIGNIFYING way of life in our world? Why or why not?

Possible answers: This will likely generate the most disagreement. This is THE question where people will start to reveal what authority gets to decide what is the most dignifying. Is it God and his word? Is it American culture? Is it Christian nationalism or Western liberalism? Is it the outspoken critics of culture? Is it social media influencers? Is it those who highlight (exclusively?) the TRUTH side of the gospel message? Is it those who highlight (exclusively?) the GRACE/COMPASSION side of the gospel message?

As the church, we are not immune to an aversion to authority. We must continually be asking ourselves who/what we are trusting - not just in word, but also in action.

Real Life Scenario

You've spent two months on a company project. It's nearing completion. You believe this will bring profound benefit to its recipients. The long days and weekend hours will be worth it. You're so close! What is more, you believe you are in the inner circle of decision-makers. You were wrong. You get informed that the CEO has decided to pull the funding from your team and that you'll need to join another team whose project will continue. They didn't consult with you nor did they care. It's over. What do you believe would be a healthy/biblical/worthwhile response within this authority structure?

For Discussion and Accountability

? What is the loudest voice and/or authority speaking into your views of identity and human dignity right now? Why? If it's not God, what is keeping you from trusting him with this?

? How can we best remind you of God's authority & voice in your life this week?

Additional Resources

- *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* by Carl Trueman
- *Strange New World--How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* by Carl Trueman