

Week 8

There is Hope. Identity, Human Dignity and the Future of the Church and Our Church

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?

? In our search for meaning and identity, a current cultural mantra is "Be true to yourself." What other similar cultural mantras have you heard concerning identity? (e.g. "live my truth," "I just gotta be real," "I'm done hiding," "I'm done trying to please people," "love is love," etc.

Leader's Note: Friends, thank you for leading with courage, conviction, and compassion. We are so thankful that we are a part of a community that can TRY (and maybe even succeed in) having difficult but important conversations like this one. Your willingness to attempt creating that kind of culture in your small group is admirable. So, thank you!!

In this final study, it is appropriate to return to items from previous conversations. These topics are deep. And they will require more than one conversation. So do not hesitate to return to a previous question or topic if that's what your group needs. We're trusting the Spirit's guidance of which the material is intended to aid and help foster. So if you sense God is at work, it's okay to follow. And if you should find the group getting considerably off track from, it's okay to invite them back.

This week we will focus on the influences to our overarching identity formation.

Created

Psalm 8:1-9

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.

² Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

³ When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

⁵ You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet:

⁷ all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,

⁸ the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

⁹ Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

This passage indicates meaning comes from the interplay between the Creator and the created.

? How is God as creator depicted in these verses?

Possible answers: Lord, majestic, world-renowned, glorious, praise-worthy, triumphant, strong, creative, worker, creator, caring, king, organized, delegator

? How are human beings depicted?

Possible answers: Crowned with glory and honor by God (v.5). Tasked with carrying out work similarly to his work (v.6.). To praise (v.2, 1 and 9). To respond with humility to his work of creation (v.4)

Identity

Isaiah 40:6-31

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

¹³ Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor?

¹⁴ Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?

¹⁵ Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

¹⁶ Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

¹⁷ Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.

¹⁸ With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?

¹⁹ As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.

²⁰ A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

²¹ Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

²² He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

²³ He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

²⁴ No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

²⁵ “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 25:1-9

Lord, you are my God: I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago.

² You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.

³ Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

⁴ You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall

⁵ and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners;

as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears

from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

? How does the Bible speak of our identity and therefore counteract culture's construction of identity?

Possible answers: The Psalm and Isaiah passages demonstrate the greatness and goodness of God as Creator. And though there are points where the smallness and frailty and fallenness of people is exposed, even still God sees us and knows us and provides for us and renews us and rescues us.

The “acquire” crowd is in constant pursuit of the next thing. The “feelings” crowd is in constant pursuit of their truest self. The “I am whatever” crowd is given to ambiguous and uncertain whateverness.

? What are the shortcomings of other ways of constructing identity? (i.e. "I am what I acquire" or "I am what I feel," or "I am whatever I say I am")

Cultural Slogan	Shortcomings	Compared to Identity in Christ
I am what I acquire (ie: success, beauty, fame, money, etc.)		
I am what I feel		
I am whatever I say I am		

Possible answers: I am what I acquire: What happens when beauty fades? Or the economy tanks? Or you get fired? Or your romantic gestures are not reciprocated? Quote: John D. Rockefeller (whose net worth equaled 1% of the entire US economy) "If your only goal is to become rich, you will never achieve it."

I am what I feel: Feelings change, Feelings fade, Feelings are incoherent, Feelings are untrustworthy. Culture knows this. A quick google search of "feelings change" demonstrates a near universality of belief that people and feelings change and we should not make a permanent decision based on temporary feelings.

I am whatever I say I am: They claim we can't tell one another how to live. Each must live their own truth and others don't have the right to disagree because it's their truth. But if I identify as a pastor who upholds a historic, orthodox, biblical view of marriage between a man and a woman, I will be labeled by some as homophobic and transphobic. On the basis of their own view, they have no right to say that something is right or is wrong.

? Which of these is the biggest struggle for you to resist believing?

Possible answers: Answers will vary.

The Bible makes clear you don't need the next thing. The Bible makes clear that feelings are fickle and uncertain. The Bible makes clear there is truth and order and a God over all who determines the reality of all these things.

Ultimately, we need truth, beauty, goodness, and compassion in ways that only the Lord can provide. What is more, amidst our own falsehoods, unloveliness, ugliness, badness, and nastiness, God still loves us and Jesus Christ still died for us. Our meaning, our hope, our identity is most assuredly rooted in a love that surpasses our own understanding.

Real Life Scenario

What would it look like to move past the surface-y conversations around the water cooler to better ascertain the value systems of coworkers? Consider this: people share opinions all of the time. The next time it happens, ask them "Why?" (not in what could become an annoying child to their parents style but with genuine curiosity as to why they come to think/believe the way that they do)

Share a scenario where this would be a challenge to you, but doable this week.

Example: Your coworker often declares the Miami Dolphins are the best football team ever. You know she grew up in Wisconsin and now lives & works here in Minneapolis, but you have no idea why she's a huge Miami Dolphins fan.

For Discussion and Accountability

? When it comes to your own identity formation and upkeep, in what area(s) are you most prone to listen to the claims of our culture?

? How can we best come alongside you to remind you of your identity and dignity to be received from God (rather than secured through stuff, derived from feelings, or constructed by your own truth)?

? Looking at the past 8 weeks, what's one takeaway that you'd like this group to know—either something that's been impactful, a question which lingers, a truth you've discovered, or an item that you'd ask this group to check in with you one in the coming weeks?