



# TRUE IDENTITY

**FINDING SIGNIFICANCE  
AND FREEDOM THROUGH  
WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST**

**JOHN C. MAJORS**



**BETHANYHOUSE**

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In memory of Daryl Brown,  
a true friend

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## SECTION 1

# WHO AM I?

**A**lecia Faith Pennington, a young woman about your age, had dreams: She wanted to travel and see the world. First, she needed to get a job and start saving for this dream. But there was a problem: She didn't exist. At least, not in the government's eyes. She had been born at home and her parents hadn't filed the usual paperwork, so she had no birth certificate. And since she didn't have a birth certificate, she had no social security number. She'd never really been to the doctor or dentist, so she had no medical or dental records. And she was homeschooled, so she had no public records there. She also had no driver's license. Basically anything the government would use to establish her citizenship, she didn't have. In their eyes, she had no identity. And this wasn't a hundred years ago; this was within the last few years.<sup>1</sup>

How do you convince the government that you really exist when you have no proof? Trying to figure this out involved lawyers, judges, and even her state's legislature. But it also created a host

of questions for Alecia—like, *Who am I, really? What is my true identity? Who am I at my very core?*

Even though Alecia didn't have the right paperwork, she really did exist and had an identity of some kind.

We all have things that have shaped who we are. They've given us an identity up to this point. But how do we discover our true identity—the truest sense of self? That's the difference between who we already are and who we really want to be.

So how do you discover your true identity? That's an enormous question, and it's what this book is going to tackle.

# 1

## What Is Identity?

**T**ry to think back to when you were two years old. Remember anything? That gross feeling of walking around in a saggy diaper? Having low self-esteem due to your enormous toddler belly and short arms? A lack of balance and self-confidence because of your colossal noggin? How does anyone survive that time emotionally?

You survived because you don't remember any of it. Not only that, but at that age, you don't care what other people think of you. You never stop and wonder if you'll make a difference in this world or if anyone will remember you after you die . . . life is simple and carefree. In fact, my three-year-old is never happier than when he's running through the house naked and unashamed. Once he gains freedom from the shackles of clothing, he'll fight like a cornered timber wolf to keep them off.

But somewhere around age five, things start to change. Children notice when people make fun of them or whether or not they are succeeding. They start to think, *Is that my fault? Should I act differently? Will people like me more if I [fill in the blank]?* Something has changed: self-awareness is developing.

This sense of self keeps growing through the middle teen years, when you start to ask yourself big questions like, *What am I good at? Do people like me? Will I make a difference in this world? and Will anyone even remember me?*

And the real biggies: *What makes me, me? What shapes the core of who I am?*

Wrestling with these questions can be exciting, but it can also hit you like a sucker punch—coming out of nowhere—leaving you dazed and confused, wondering what you did to deserve it, and asking, *Why can't I just go back to my three-year-old naked and blissful self?*

### **Why It's Important to Understand Your Identity**

No, you don't want to go back there. Would you really want to go through potty training again? The questions you have are real and have to be dealt with. But here's the cool part—wrestling with these questions *now* can make a big difference. Developing an understanding *now* of who you are, of what you want out of life, of what you really value at your core, will help you shape your life for the future.

Understanding your identity is also important because *who you are determines what you do*. You will act like who you are. And the more you intentionally shape your identity, the more your actions will reflect the person you want to be. Having a clear sense of identity is having integrity; meaning, you act, live, and think in a way that matches the way you view yourself.

But if you don't have that, it creates confusion, chaos, and inner turmoil. And it can feed an identity crisis.

I had a friend in high school who was well-liked by everyone and was a pretty serious athlete. But he had a huge car wreck that he barely survived, and his athleticism disappeared. His sense of identity crumbled and he struggled with depression and anger toward God. If your identity is based on something that can be taken away,

it can crumble in a hurry. But if it is based on something more enduring, you'll have a better chance of weathering an identity crisis.

So how do you get that? How do you get a clear sense of identity? And how do you get an identity based in something that will endure?

Well, before answering that, we first need to start by understanding how your identity gets shaped, because there's so much more to it than we often realize.

### **What Shapes Your Identity?**

Identity is a complex thing. If someone asks "Who are you?" what do you tell them? Your name? That's a good start. But that's not all. Your identity includes things like your age; your likes and dislikes; your hobbies and sports; your favorite books, games, movies, food; and maybe the influence of famous people like sports stars or actors. Drop in a favorite Bible verse or two and, of course, don't forget the detailed list of your most revered figures of the sixteenth-century Magisterial Reformation. (Okay . . . maybe not that . . .)

The point is, there's a whole host of things that go into shaping who you are. Like a deck of cards, they all play a part of the game. But like a deck of cards, some have more significance than others.

#### ***Family***

Americans tend to think they are self-made. They went out and tracked down their identity, grabbed it by the hair, dragged it back to the cave, and owned it. But some of your most defining characteristics—the things most central to your identity—you really had nothing to do with. Your skin, hair, eye color, and height—you didn't choose. You were born in the age of the internet, not the age of the Inquisition (be thankful for that). You also played no role whatsoever in choosing your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings (though you may indeed wish to swap some players in that fantasy league). All the basic well-being stats, such

as your predicted lifetime income level, your education, health, religion, political party, and even whether or not you'll eat brussels sprouts, kale salad, and quinoa when you're forty—all of those can be determined almost entirely by your parents. Yikes. Most of us don't like to admit that. But the statistics show that who your parents are greatly influences who you will become.

Now, that news could be really exciting or it could be scary. You might even have mixed feelings. But take heart. This isn't some fatalistic predetermined path you have to follow. You can still blaze your own trail.

Take Jeff Kemp, for example. Jeff was born to an uber-successful, larger-than-life personality. His dad, Jack Kemp, was a pro quarterback, winning MVP awards and an AFL championship. He was popular in politics, serving on President Reagan's cabinet and even running for president and vice president. So Jeff was born in his dad's shadow (no pressure). But he adored his dad and tried to model his life after him. And like his dad, Jeff went on to have a career as a pro quarterback. But after eleven years in the NFL, Jeff didn't follow his dad into politics. Instead, he started a nonprofit ministry to strengthen families. He was like his dad in many ways, but he went his own way in others.

So yes, your family has a huge influence on the person you become. They open and sometimes close doors you might not have known existed. They shape your value system in huge ways, for good and sometimes for ill. And more than likely you will grow up to be like your parents in more ways than you know.

### *Culture*

The culture you live in—the country, community, even ethnic culture—also has a big influence in shaping you. In fact, you often decide which feelings you're going to follow based on what the culture tells you. This is another one that's hard to accept. We want to believe we are in complete control of our decisions and directing our lives. But that really is an illusion. Not convinced?

I've heard Tim Keller, a pastor and author in New York City, describe it this way:

Imagine 1,200 years ago, [there's] an Anglo-Saxon warrior walking through the streets [of his village]. And he looks into his heart and sees a couple of deep feelings. One is aggression. He just loves smashing people. If someone gets in his way, he loves killing them. And he looks at himself and sees that aggressive impulse and he says, "That's me. I like that. I'm going to express that." On the other hand, he sees another feeling . . . he sees same-sex attraction. What's he going to say? "That's not me. Nope. We're going to squelch that."

[Now imagine] a young man walking down the street in Manhattan today. He looks into his heart and sees aggression. What's he going to say? "I need therapy. I need anger management." But [when] he looks in his heart [and] sees same-sex attraction, he says, "That's me."

What's going on here? The Anglo-Saxon's culture is based on [shame and] the idea that society will fall apart if it doesn't respect strength. So the best thing you can do for society if someone crosses you is to kill them. His culture was telling him that some feelings are really you and some are not. And our modern culture is doing the same.<sup>1</sup>

What is acceptable in one culture might not be in another, and you make daily decisions based on culture without even realizing it. It's like the old joke about a fish that meets a frog, and the frog says, "Gee, the water sure is nice today." And the fish says, "What water?" Once you stop laughing, I'll explain . . . Just like a fish isn't even aware of the water they swim in, your culture surrounds you, shapes you, moves and directs your life without your even being aware of it. So without realizing it, your culture tells you which feelings you should follow and which you should ignore.

### ***Male and Female***

The Bible starts with a family and ends with a family. And from the very beginning, God made one key distinction in the human race:

He created a man, and then He created a woman. Male and female. Two distinct sexes.<sup>2</sup> And that word *and* between “male and female” is all the difference between just one lonely dude hanging out with herds of hound dogs for hundreds of years and our entire civilization. Because without a woman, a man doesn’t make more people.

God had a design in creating two distinct sexes. And the way you are born has a huge influence on your identity. It shapes the way you think about yourself and the way you interact with your culture and the world. And it’s not just perception and cultural influence. There are real scientific and biological differences between men and women. I’m going to paint in generalities here—there are exceptions—but statistically, everything that follows is true.

In general, men are stronger and taller and have more body hair than women. Women live longer, sing higher, and tend to have more babies (many more, in fact). Men are more aggressive, take more risks, get struck by lightning a lot more frequently than women,<sup>3</sup> and wreck their cars as often as an eighty-year-old, gray-haired grandma.<sup>4</sup> Women do a better job of nurturing and caring for those in need and tend to have a stronger sense of commitment. Men tend to be more analytical and compartmentalized while women tend to factor emotion and the big picture into decisions. Even the structure of the eyeball is different for men and women.<sup>5</sup> That’s why kindergarten boys tend to color with one dark crayon, scribbling as furiously as possible, while girls pick every pastel shade in the carton to portray a pony prancing in a field of petunias.

These days there are lots of conversations about gender and how it gets expressed, which we’ll talk more about later. But the point for now is that being born a boy or a girl shapes your identity in significant ways.

### *Friends*

Your friends play a HUGE role in your identity formation. In fact, you’re probably looking to your peers for a sense of identity now more than to your parents. Approval from your peers feels so important;

you're often more easily persuaded to do things you wouldn't normally do to gain their approval. And sometimes it's unexplainable.

In high school I believed that having a Coca-Cola T-shirt, an L.L. Bean jacket, a Swatch watch, and a pair of Eastland shoes (worn without socks) would make me more popular or more important. I look back at that and just laugh (and if you search for pictures of this getup, you will too). At some point, you'll look back on whatever gives you street cred now and do the same. It's part of the reason why your friends might try drugs, steal things, have sex before marriage, watch porn, and even listen to classical music (gasp!) to gain the approval of others. It feels good when people like you, even if for the wrong reasons.

Here's the cool part, though. Friends can also positively shape you in a powerful way during this season. A friend came to me a couple years after high school and said, "The way you were always looking to be active and push yourself to learn, that really inspired me." In fact, after barely graduating high school and launching his career working part-time jobs and living with his mom, he decided that maybe another route would lead to more happiness in life. He got focused and went to college. This is a guy who almost didn't graduate because he missed fifty days of school his senior year just goofing off. Fifty! You never know how you might be influencing others for good without realizing it.

A well-known Bible teacher and motivational speaker, Charlie T. (as in "Tremendous") Jones, has a famous quote: "You'll be the same person tomorrow as you are today except for the books you read and the people you meet." You can be intentional to surround yourself with friends that push you to grow, but one thing is for sure—the people you spend the most time around will shape you, for better or for worse.

### ***Books and Mentors***

Reading great books about great people will change you. C. S. Lewis, Winston Churchill, Elisabeth Elliot, Margaret Thatcher,

all had the course of their lives shaped from an early age by books. Former President Ronald Reagan listed one of his favorite books as *That Printer of Udell's*, which tells the story of Dick Falkner, who rises above his troubled past and becomes a godly man. When Reagan finished reading it as a young man, he told his mom, “I want to be like the guy in that book.” In Falkner, he saw a man of character and integrity, and spent the rest of his life trying to live up to that standard.<sup>6</sup>

Books can serve as mentors in your life—but you also need to pursue real mentors. These are people older than you who can give you wisdom. Whether two years older or thirty, both have lots to offer. Having a mentor doesn't have to be a formal thing, but when you see someone you want to be like, do all you can to be around them. Our church youth group leader was a guy I looked up to and admired at so many levels. If he was leading a Bible study or leading a mission trip, I was there. There was no other place I wanted to be than around him. He was, and is still, a man of deep character. He shaped my life in many ways.

Many other things shape your identity: your successes in sports and in school, but also your failures, as well as your romantic relationships. (Man, those can really shape you. In fact, there's a whole chapter on this later.)

Here's the big point: There's not simply one defining characteristic that totally explains you to the world. Many things shaped your identity to form the awesome person you are today.

I hope this book will help you take hold of shaping your identity. Many folks just float down the river of life, waiting for whatever comes their way, drifting wherever the river leads. That can be great (I love a good float trip), but there are times you need to take charge of the journey, paddle yourself out of the river, and go somewhere else. This book is about giving you the vision, the courage, and the tools to do that.

And here's why. Because there's more to life than whatever seems ultimate right now. There really is. Many teens get trapped in a

### *What Is Identity?*

downward spiral, believing that the momentary praise of peers is what gives true meaning to life. Yes, there's always a chance the things your peers praise may be a really big part of the rest of your life. But there's a good chance you'll look back on your high school years and laugh till you cry at what seemed so critical to your happiness at the time.

So we're going to start with the one thing that will last: the key to finding a true identity. If you get this right, it will put everything else in perspective.

#### *Make It Personal*

- How would you describe yourself to others? What five words would you use?
- What areas do you feel give you a sense of identity (e.g., friends, hobbies, academics, music, church, family, work)?
- If you could change one thing about the person you are, what would it be? (It could be something you don't like and you want to get rid of, or something you would like to have that you don't currently have.)