

Session 1: The Reframing Story

Introduction

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reframes everything, bringing hope, life, and meaning to every part of human culture. And yet many of us can't see how our faith shapes much of everyday life and experience.

“Sunday to Sunday, the in-between days, where was Jesus?”¹

“I didn't think about the whole of who I am, what I was passionate about, or how God uniquely made me.”²

What are God's purposes for us? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? How do we live in the world, but not of the world?

“God wants to make us more ourselves.”³

“He is holding all things together, and that he is reconciling all things to himself.”⁴

We're exploring, “How does the biblical story reframe our story?”

“We live out of our stories.”⁵

“So be located in the story, the biblical story, in which God reveals himself, his character, and his life.”⁶

Jesus Christ is the most compelling person in world history. Christians believe his life, death, and resurrection is the starting point of a wholly new way of understanding all creation.

¹ Hugo Ciro, CEO of Level Ground Trading, Victoria, BC.

² Christine Lee Buchholz, Consultant and Board Member, Restavek Foundation, Falls Church, Virginia.

³ Hans Boersma, Professor of Theology, Regent College.

⁴ Amy Sherman, Author, Kingdom Calling, Senior Fellow, Sagamore Institute.

⁵ Rikk Watts, Professor of New Testament, Regent College.

⁶ Sarah Williams, Professor of History, Regent College.

Colossians 1:16 – 20

For in him, all things were created: things in heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything, he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things.

“The death and resurrection of Jesus is the centre of history and the center of revelation.”⁷

“Christ came to make us whole, fully human, integrated again, restoring all the broken pieces.”⁸

“Jesus is present to us as Lord in New York City, in Vancouver, in Hong Kong, in Sydney, or in some little town no one has ever heard of. He is lord of that place as well.”⁹

“Our Lord Jesus is the lord of all life. He’s our lord, whether we are asleep or awake. We live in him.”¹⁰

“The call of the gospel and the claims of God and the lordship of Christ in our lives has to do with all of who we are.”¹¹

⁷ Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary.

⁸ Mariam Kamell, Associate Professor, New Testament Studies, Regent College.

⁹ Andy Crouch, Partner for Theology and Culture at Praxis, Regent College.

¹⁰ Eliud Wabukala, Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya.

¹¹ Ruth Padilla Deborst, Director of Christian Formation and Leadership Development, World Vision International.

Welcome to ReFrame. Throughout this series, we're going to be asking one big question: If Jesus is the redeemer of all things, how does faith reframe every aspect of our lives?

To answer this question, we're setting out on a journey to find out how the biblical story expands and challenges our understanding of who God is, who we are, and the role of Christian faith in the modern world.

We'll be meeting people from around the globe who are asking questions about faith in their everyday lives.

"I think the hardest thing for me over the years has been to sort out exactly how what I do day-to-day connects with my faith."

"I became less and less interested in my work as I got more and more involved in church. I'm an accountant. What has that got to do with God?"

"You're trained to think your life is going to be so epic, and really, our lives are so ordinary."

"I was hardly able to find any meaning for what I was doing. Every morning, I got up, had my cup of coffee, and packed up my briefcase, put in my notebook, laptop computer, and then moved out. And then it's just like a dead man walking."

"Does God care about my work? Does my work have anything to do with his work? Is my work relevant to what he's doing in the world?"

In each episode, we'll be exploring exciting and relevant biblical teaching with a top theologian. And we'll be unpacking each topic with thought leaders, who will help us understand how the Bible makes sense of our lives today. ReFrame is about asking difficult questions and engaging in deeper conversations about faith, discipleship, and mission.

"One of our little gospel songs that we sang when I was a boy was, 'When we're saved, saved to tell others.' I began to wonder, well, if we're saved to tell others and if

that's what we're here for, what are the others saved for? What are we here for as human beings? What's our task?"

"The question, 'Does God really care about life? Does God care about cities? Does God care about cultures?' I think probably the deeper question is, 'Who is God? What kind of God are we believing in?' Because, you see, if we get God wrong, then we're going to get that question wrong."

Our hope is that our vision of what God is doing in the world will flourish and grow, along with a renewed sense of confidence in Jesus and his gospel. This course aims to help Christians like you and me live out our faith in all of everyday life. ReFrame is about nothing less than encountering Jesus afresh and allowing his story to transform our story.

The Bible claims that Jesus is the Lord over all things. It is not always clear how this is true in modern life. In this session, we're going to ask, "Can the Bible really speak to the complexities and challenges of our lives today?"

Complexity

I'm going to tell you a story about my Great-Auntie Mary. Back in the 1980s, I got my first pair of contact lenses, which at that point made me an early adopter of this revolutionary technology. Suddenly I could see this broader frame of vision, and it was all in focus without the frames of my glasses in the way. So, I was very happy. Some time later, I went back home from university. (I probably needed to get the washing done or something.) And my great-Auntie Mar was there. Now, there are a few things you need to know about Auntie Mary. She was a rather formidable lady. She was born in 1896, so at that point she was in her late 80s. And she had decidedly fixed opinions, shall we say. So, when Auntie Mary saw me, she said, "Where are your glasses?" I tried to explain to her that I didn't need them. I had these really tiny, invisible pieces of plastic that were just on my eyeball. Well, Great-

Auntie Mary drew herself back and looked at me, and in a stern voice said, “Don’t you tell me lies.”¹²

Now, life today is complex, isn’t it? The pace of change seems unbelievable. It’s hard to keep up with it, even harder to make sense of it. Somehow, contemporary life seems to be leaving us behind, leaving behind something also of our humanity. Sophisticated communications technologies are everywhere, but according to the opinion polls, most of us feel lonely. We have labour-saving devices for everything from making coffee to cleaning our teeth, yet who among us feels like we have more free time? Our economy keeps getting more productive, but we’re less and less confident than ever that our health, our retirement provisions are sufficient, or that our children will inhabit a better world than the one we do.

For sure, the modern world has brought us much that we wouldn’t want to do without. But it’s also brought the challenge of complexity amidst the post-modern fragmentation of many of the customs, institutions, and expectations that previous generations could count on. Increasingly, we’re left as individuals to figure things out for ourselves, but it's harder and harder to make sense of it all. And in the midst of all this, we’re inundated with messages telling us what to do.

Integration

Self-help publishing has become a growth industry. Commercials tell us to invest in the latest financial product, until we see the next ad that tells us we can, “Buy now on credit, because you’re worth it.”

The institutions of government, science, and most recently, of course, finance, have followed the church, parents, and teachers into the growing throng of leadership voices that we used to trust, but now feel let down by and suspicious of.

Part of the complexity of contemporary life is precisely the confusion – the babble of voices offering to help us navigate the surprisingly unpredictable terrain of early 21s

¹² Paul Williams, Executive Director, Marketplace Institute, Regent College. (Paul is the main speaker throughout this video.)

century life. There are a whole host of competing stories in our culture about what life is really about, “How to get on, how to make sense of everything, how to be happy.”

What does Christian faith have to do with all this? If we want to take the claims of Jesus Christ seriously, this is a question we must answer. Jesus said he came to save and redeem the whole world, and he claims the authority of “Lord of all the world” to do this. So, is Christianity relevant to the whole of my life? Or does God not really care about all that stuff? Are we supposed to just ignore it, wait for heaven? Is Dawkins right? Are we delusional? Is Christianity a made-up fairy tale to make us feel better? Or is Jesus Christ vitally relevant to the world, to my job, my family life, my community, my children?

“We live in a world that compartmentalizes. Sometimes this division is spoken of in terms of ‘Well, there are secular things and then there are sacred things,’ things that really matter to God and then things that don’t really matter to God; simply and sadly, a compartmentalized faith, a faith that somehow says, ‘Well, on Sunday I believe these things to be true, but when I go to work on Monday, it doesn’t really make sense of what I do.’”¹³

“Most people today, the way they live and what they’re doing 9:00 to 5:00, their faith doesn’t connect with it really. It’s a kind of practical atheism. So, it’s not an atheism in the sense that it’s a defiant decision not to believe. It’s just that their faith doesn’t connect with what they do in the workplace, what they do for a living. It creates this sort of division between who we are at home and who we are on the weekends and who we are at work.”¹⁴

“In the thousands of conversations I’ve had with people over many years, I would say there’s one question which is asked in many different ways, and it is this: Does what I believe about God and myself in the world, does it really make sense of the life I long for, the longings I have: love and life and sex and money and school and

¹³ Steven Garber, Founder, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, & Culture.

¹⁴ Craig Gay, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Regent College.

learning and politics and business and economics? I want a Jesus that can actually make sense of every square inch of the whole of reality.”¹⁵

Assimilate or Withdraw

It’s crucially important, isn’t it, that Christianity is actually true, not just some kind of comforting story to help us get by. We have a deep desire to live authentically, with integrity. We desire to respond to God’s call on us as human beings to be his image bearers in creation. Jesus Christ calls us to be in the world, but not of the world, to be a blessing to the world by not conforming to it. But in the midst of life’s complexity, pressures, and confused voices, it’s so easy to fall into one of two temptations. We assimilate, we become indistinguishable from everything and everyone around us, or we withdraw. To avoid assimilation, we retreat into a kind of Christian cultural ghetto where we may be distinct, but we end up irrelevant. Indistinguishable or irrelevant. In either case, how then is Christ manifest in our lives?

How do we avoid these two temptations? How do we live faithfully in the world so that we’re a blessing to it and witnesses of Christ’s coming kingdom? Well, these are some of the questions we’re going to be exploring in this course. These questions are not new. We’re going to listen in together to a conversation that two of the first disciples had just after Jesus had died on the cross.

Luke 24:13 – 35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened in these days?” “What things?” he asked. “About

¹⁵ Steven Garber.

Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what’s more, it’s the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they’d seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they didn’t see Jesus.”

He said to them, “How foolish you are, how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it’s nearly evening. The day is almost over.” So, he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened. They recognized him. He disappeared from their sight.

They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven, and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It’s true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

So, we’ve got these two characters, and they’re walking along the road. They’re on the way. They’re disciples. They’ve known Jesus. They’ve seen him in the flesh. They’re Jews; they know the Scripture inside out – they’ve known it since they were able to remember anything. They’re steeped in the culture of the people of God. They’re also, of course, living in the context of many competing stories. Not only the

competing stories of Israel, the stories of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, for example, but also the stories of Greek philosophy and Roman imperial power. And those stories are the stories that dominate their world. They are, in many ways, rather like us. They're feeling confused. The Story they thought explained their lives and made sense of it all seems to have fallen apart. The powerful competing stories of Rome and the Jewish religious institutions, seem to have triumphed. They're downcast, afraid, and deeply disappointed. Into that context Jesus comes and encounters them. They can't recognize Jesus, even though he's standing right in front of them.

Don't we struggle to see Jesus' presence in our lives, even though we know that he's promised to be with us even to the end of the age? We don't see how Jesus is connected to the things that dominate our world – science and technology, health care, business, the problems of war, poverty, and disease, the challenges of family, homemaking, sexual identity. Might our confusion, disappointment, and fear in the face of modern life stop us from seeing him, too?

Now, having encountered the disciples, Jesus does something surprising. He takes them back through the Scripture and helps them understand it. Have you ever wondered, "Why did Jesus do that?" Why not just say, "Here I am. Boo!"

Rather than simply reveal himself, Jesus explained the story of the Bible to them. Stories are crucial to human life. They help us orient ourselves in the world, make sense of it. The atheist-turned-Catholic moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

Now, in saying that we live by stories, I'm not talking about bedtime stories or that we live in a fictional world that we create out of our heads. Rather, I'm talking about the fundamental stories that shape our understanding of the world, answer questions about where we come from, who we are, what the purpose of life is. In this sense, stories are claims about the nature of ultimate reality.

In our day, we might think about the story of scientific materialism, the story of environmentalism, the story of modern capitalism, or the story of secular toleration. All of these stories claim to tell us who we are and what life is about, and if we believe them, we'll live by them. In other words, stories have consequences. The truth is, we're surrounded by cultural, organizational, familial, and personal stories. And we live by them because we're immersed in them. They don't just shape our thinking but also our emotions, our desires.

Much of modern advertising is deliberately designed to shape us by constantly repeating stories of consumerism. What we believe about the world shapes not only our thoughts and desires, but also our expectations about what is possible. Stories change what we can see.

How are we being shaped today, I wonder? What stories are we living by?

“Stories speak to what matters, what moves the heart. Stories are really, I think, the way we understand ourselves and our world. They establish meaning for us, meaning that cannot just be expressed in theories and statements, but what makes life worth living.”¹⁶

“People who study stories and who study human beings realize that life doesn't make sense until we know the story we're in. In fact, the only way we can make sense of our own life is to tell a story about our life. So, storytelling is central to our life.”¹⁷

“People today are wrestling with issues of significance. What makes a life worth living? What makes a life good? We have a lot of understandings in our culture of what makes a life successful or prosperous. But I think we've lost some of the understanding of what makes a life good.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Susan Phillips, Professor of Sociology and Christianity, New College Berkeley.

¹⁷ Scot McKnight, Author, *The King Jesus Gospel*, Professor of New Testament.

¹⁸ Susan Phillips.

Jesus

The disciples on the road to Emmaus had lost sight of the true story. As a result, they were confused and blinded. They didn't expect to see Jesus, and they couldn't recognize him. So, Jesus opened their minds to understand the true story of Scripture.

It's my conviction that Jesus wants to do the same thing among his people today. We need to understand again the story of ultimate reality as God sees it. We need to understand again the grand story of the Bible. The majority of the Bible is in the form of stories about people, nations, and cultures, their dealings with one another and with God. But the Bible as a whole also forms a large-scale story. It has a beginning, in which it answers the questions of "Who God is?" "What it means to be human?" "Why we're here?"

It has an end, a vision of where history is going, what it will look like in the end. And in between, a whole load of books, chapters, and stories that help us understand how to live and how not to live in between times. If we're to see things truthfully, not be confused and blinded by the many false, competing stories that are on offer, it's crucial that we understand the biblical story and where we are in it.

The text we've just read deliberately pairs the opening of the Scriptures by Jesus with the opening of the disciples' eyes to see him. As Jesus told the story, they suddenly encountered him in the enacting of the story. Their eyes were opened. They went from not seeing Jesus to seeing him through the retelling and enacting of the story, and they responded with passion and excitement that grew as they heard the story being told again. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?"

"The Bible is one book with a number of writers, but one spirit. Now, if you read a novel, say a long novel like *Moby Dick*, you wouldn't think of opening the book in the middle and reading two or three sentences and saying, 'that's what the story is.' You've got to get the whole story. Jesus comes to us primarily in the form of a story,

which means that you can't abstract the propositions or principles or rules out of a story.¹⁹

“If we had a book of lessons, that may seem to be a more efficient delivery of information, but a story isn't about delivery of information. It can do so much more than just teach you. It can transform you. People are leaving the church, who are adolescent and 20s, because nothing seems relevant to them. It's because we haven't told them the story, and they haven't been captured by this amazing story.”²⁰

“So, I know that I'm drawn to this Christian story, this Christian vision of reality, because I think it actually is reality with a capital R. It's really the way to make sense of life.

“There was a man named Lesslie Newbigin. He was a missionary to India for 40 years, and one of the friendships he developed was with a Hindu scholar. And this man said to him at one point, ‘I don't know why, when Christian missionaries brought the Bible to India, they said to us as if somehow this was simply one more book to read.’ He says, ‘I finally have read your Bible from beginning to end.’ He says, ‘I need you to know that this is a completely unique book. It makes sense of everything in history from beginning to end.’”²¹

“When we don't catch the big story, we don't know what story we're in as Christians, that God's story is our story. And that way, our story becomes God's story.”²²

So, however you might be feeling in your life at this point, be encouraged. Jesus wants to draw near, to open up the Scriptures to you, to give you understanding of his purposes and presence in the world, to reignite your passion for him, and to actually dwell with you and reveal himself to you in your daily life. But maybe you're like my Great-Auntie Mary, who couldn't believe I was wearing contact lenses. You find it hard to believe that a new way of seeing is possible, that encountering Jesus

¹⁹ Eugene Peterson, Pastor and Author, *The Message*, Professor Emeritus, Regent College.

²⁰ Sally Lloyd-Jones, Author, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*.

²¹ Steven Garber.

²² Scot McKnight.

could enlarge your field of vision and bring everything into focus. The truth of the story Jesus told was clear to the disciples, because it made sense of everything. Suddenly they understood what the Apostle Paul describes as the mystery of God's will, revealed in Christ. And then, wonder of wonders, the reality of the story was manifest to them.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Conclusion

This course is an opportunity to re-encounter the truth that Jesus is the starting point for a completely new way of understanding what it means to be a person in the 21st century, not just in the private, religious parts of our lives, but in all of our lives, all of the time. We believe that the gospel involves everyone and everything. Our culture is increasingly fragmented and blinded to what true life is. Jesus has come to open our eyes, offer us abundant life. The gospel is as true today as it's always been. It's the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

So, I want to conclude by asking you, "Where is your Emmaus Road? What's your context? Where are you experiencing a sense of confusion, alienation, disappointment, loss of confidence? Where do you long to see God present and acting?"

Everyone one of us is unique, with different gifts, experiences, skills, life stages, geographies, and contexts. But each of us is on a discipleship journey with each other and with Jesus.

"This is my Emmaus Road." (*man with blurred background*)

"This is my Emmaus Road." (*woman in front of a backdrop of a galaxy*)

"This is my Emmaus Road." (*man in a warehouse*)

"This is my Emmaus Road." (*woman with family beside a house*)

“This is my Emmaus Road.” (*man in a classroom*)

“This is my Emmaus Road.” (*woman on a sidewalk on a busy street*)

The gospel involves everyone and everything. ReFrame is an invitation to travel on an Emmaus Road Journey. Over the next nine episodes, we’re asking Jesus to encounter us and to help us understand the stories of our culture that shape us today and to walk alongside us as we journey through the whole biblical story and see how our story is part of God’s story. And finally, to see how we can respond in our homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and cities.

The disciples on that first Emmaus Road had their eyes opened to see Jesus afresh. Their hearts were set on fire, and they were filled with confidence and joy. Join us as we set off together on our own journey of faith, seeing that encounter with Jesus that reframes everything.

Session 2: Cultural Stories

Introduction

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reframes everything, bringing hope, life, and meaning to every part of human culture. And yet many of us can't see how our faith shapes much of everyday life and experience.

“Sunday to Sunday, the in-between days, where was Jesus?”¹

“I didn't think about the whole of who I am, what was I passionate about, or how God uniquely made me.”²

What are God's purposes for us? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? How do we live in the world, but not of the world?

“God wants to make us more ourselves.”³

“He is holding all things together, and that he is reconciling all things to himself.”⁴

We're exploring, “How does the biblical story reframe our story?”

“We live out of our stories.”⁵

“So be located in the story, the biblical story, in which God reveals himself, his character, and his life.”⁶

¹ Hugo Ciro, CEO of Level Ground Trading, Victoria, BC.

² Christine Lee Buchholz, Consultant and Board Member, Restavek Foundation, Falls Church, Virginia.

³ Hans Boersma, Professor of Theology, Regent College.

⁴ Amy Sherman, Author, Kingdom Calling, Senior Fellow, Sagamore Institute.

⁵ Rikk Watts, Professor of New Testament, Regent College.

⁶ Sarah Williams, Professor of History, Regent College.

In modern culture, image and identity loom large in our lives.

“Everyone who’s born on the planet asks questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Who are we?’ and ‘How should I live?’ I mean, I think, to me, that’s built into the fabric of who we are. It’s the nature of the human condition, those questions. It may not be asked in exactly those ways, but I think they’re asked in that way. So, even when I watch commercials on perfume on tv, they’re asking questions about, ‘Who are you?’”⁷

There are a host of competing stories about what life is really about, how to get on, how to be happy, and many of them are at odds with the teaching of the Bible. For Christians, the question of identity can be deeply confusing and troubling.

Many of us are like the disciples on the Emmaus road 2,000 years ago. We want to believe in Jesus, but we have a hard time understanding just how he’s the redeemer of every aspect of our lives.

Modern life has brought many benefits, but it’s also brought the challenge of complexity and a multitude of messages telling us what to do.

“I learned a lot about the importance of personal salvation and personal morality, but I don’t think I grasped any sense of how my faith interacted with the world and how to live out my faith in school or otherwise. So, the lens through which I saw success and performance was always, ‘You do well in school,’ ‘You go to a great school, and then you get a great job, and then you make a lot of money, and you have this perfect life.’”⁸

After graduating from college, Christine and her husband, Ryan, moved to Cincinnati, where they joined a local church. Christine began a successful career in business, but gradually, she found herself asking some profound questions about her identity and shape of her life.

⁷ Rod Wilson, Professor of Counseling and Psychology, President, Regent College.

⁸ Christine Lee Buchholz.

“I was working as a management consultant and I had opportunities to progress and make more money, and I was climbing the ladder. So, it was just all about achieving that next milestone, and I realized I saw myself as how much I was making and what my billable rate was and what I was contributing to the company; I saw myself as what my opportunities to climb the ladder were, rather than the whole of who I am. In the culture I came from, it was about succeeding in the workplace and making more money to be able to buy this or that furniture or to go on this or that great trip and eat in these restaurants. But that’s where I feel like I started to wrestle with, ‘Is this what life is about?’ I realized I saw myself tied to the value of money, not about who I was.”⁹

The temptation to take on the values of our culture – to assimilate – is ever present. When it comes to identity, it seems that Christians have to know the stories of their culture and know the biblical story.

“When we don’t know the biblical story – when we don’t see it – we fall for other stories. Or these other stories so contaminate the Kingdom story, that the Kingdom story is distorted and, in some ways, actually ruined, and it collapses in and of itself.”¹⁰

Jesus told his disciples he was sending them into the world, but they should not be of the world. If we’re to avoid the temptation to assimilate – to look like everyone else – it seems it’s vitally important to find out, what sort of world are we in. In this episode, we’re going to explore how the dominant stories of our culture shape identity today, and how faith in Jesus Christ challenges us to live a very different way of life.

⁹ Christine Lee Buchholz.

¹⁰ Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary.

Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

“So, we were given an invitation in the last session – an invitation to see Jesus. And when we do that, it changes everything, doesn’t it? It changes how we think about ourselves. It changes how we think about reality. It’s a bit like putting on a pair of glasses when you finally got the prescription right. (I’ve been struggling with that over the summer.) The world comes into focus at last; it’s beautiful; it’s awesome in its beauty. But it’s also extremely challenging. It’s challenging because the minute we see him, we have to look at our culture again, and we start to look at the narratives that shape our own culture. We begin to ask new kinds of questions about our identity, and most of all we begin to see how steeped we are, like tea bags in boiling water, in the culture that places values on us and in us that distract our gaze from Jesus Christ. So, it’s challenging.”¹¹

Now, the material we’re going to look at together has a central question – a kind of pivotal question – that runs right down through the middle of it, it organizes it. And that question... 3 words: “Who am I?” It’s really, really simple. Just about as simple as quantum physics. (That might be simple for some of you, but it certainly is not for me.) This is the question, I think, which forms the heart-cry of the post-modern generation. But why this question? There’s absolutely nothing new about it, is there? Every single generation throughout time has asked the question, “Who am I?” Philosophers will keep asking that question until the end of time. We can’t live everyday life unless we have some kind of answer to it. But I want to argue that there is something unique about the way in which we’re asking this question today.

If you see this [picture of a mushroom cloud from the atom bomb at Hiroshima], or you see this [picture of dead bodies at Auschwitz], it’s going to change the way in which you ask the question, “Who am I?” It’s going to change the perspective from which we consider who we are as human beings. It has to. And the dominant thought structures which have really prevailed in western cultures since the 18th

¹¹ Sarah Williams, Professor of History, Regent College. (Sarah is the main speaker for this session.)

century, have inadequate answers for these kinds of horrors. Can you really believe, confidently, in human reason to perfect mankind in the light of this kind of thing? Is civilization inevitably progressing? And most of all, what kind of God can let this happen? Can we really rely on Christianity as a solid foundation for social identity? During the course of the late 20th century, modern frameworks such as these, they've fragmented, they've given way. And the certainties really are no longer certain. And it's left a vacuum of meaning right at the heart. I would go so far as to argue that it's actually left us with an identity crisis.

Philosopher Charles Taylor says, "An identity crisis is this: an acute form of disorientation which people express in terms of not knowing who they are." And when identity collapses, we experience, (a quote from Taylor) "radical uncertainty as to where we stand." We lose coherent meaning; we lose it relationally; we lose it spiritually; and we lose it politically.

So, what I want us to do together is just to look at four characteristics of our contemporary identity crisis. The first is dislocation.

Dislocation

January 1964, Bob Dylan wrote his third album, the title track of which was, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Now, what Dylan does is, he uses the language of the Sermon on the Mount and, essentially, he calls upon his parents' generation to get out of the way, to let a new kind of future arise. The past must be dislocated – cut free from – the present, and the present from the past. Now, nearly five decades later, we've lost our memory as a society. And we retreat, we treat with skepticism, every kind of identity forming story that gets handed down from generation to generation. What that means is our identity has been lifted out of time and space – lifted, dislocated – and it's no longer connected backwards in time to the events and the narratives which shape who we are, and it's no longer connected forwards in time to vision and direction. There's a history gap right in the middle. Of course, if a person loses their memory, badly, they've got a psychiatric problem. If a community loses its memory, it needs help in the same way.

George Orwell, the author of *Animal Farm* (some of you know that book), he argued that the quickest way to destroy a people is to obliterate their understanding of history. It's like being a leaf when you don't know you're part of a tree. But past consciousness is not only linked to the present, it's also inseparably linked to the future. If you don't know where you've come from, it's extremely difficult to know where you're going. Direction requires identity. And identity generates direction. It's vital. 19th century historian, Lord Acton, put it like this, "Knowledge of the past is like a compass. Without it we're tossed around by the wind, and we cannot fix our position." The identity crisis that we're talking about here is resulting in a profound loss of social identity in our society.

As Christians, however, we are located in a story with a past, a present, and a future – a beginning, a middle, and an end. And at a time when social identities are dislocating and fragmenting, we need to be rooted in the story that makes ultimate sense of reality, as we were saying in the last session. It's time to recover our memory.

An absence of memory leads to a second aspect of how we construct our sense of self today: Invention.

Invention

One of the core values of our culture is self-invention. Every individual has the right to define and create who they are. I am what I choose to be. Self-creation mimics the values of consumerism. We form our identities through the acquisition of symbolic tokens, objects, images, and they clothe us with the self, and they distinguish us in the eyes of others. These symbolic tokens, they might be a university degree, they might be designer clothing, they might be the postal code address that's prestigious that you have coveted for a long time. These things can be bought, they can be sold, they're traded. And selves are then projected like an Instagram; I design my life, and I image it.

"One of the great stories of our culture (great in the sense of influential) is the consumerist story: I am what I buy, I am what I eat, I am what I wear, I am what I

own, I am what people think I am because of what they see I have. Another story at work today is the story of passion, the story of desire, the story of sex. So that, I am what I feel, I am my desires.”¹²

“There are so many narratives flying around in our world today, and a lot of them are based on a consumer mindset – you are what you buy, you are the brands that you can afford to wear – and unless you’re part of that consumer economy, you’re nothing, you’re an outsider. So the good life is something you can buy and you can construct for yourself.”¹³

“This whole cult of self-fulfillment is the reason why we have our super malls, and why we have this intense shopping and consumerism of our culture today. So, clearly, we have tried to say that the curing of the soul comes through shopping. Well, it’s crazy. Does it give us that fulfillment, that transformation that we need in our lives? No, it doesn’t.”¹⁴

There’s deep irony in here, deep irony. Because identity culture is founded on an illusion of uniqueness. We understand ourselves to be inventing a unique identity. But in fact, the close interweaving of material consumption with identity is creating homogeneity. Am I, in fact, buying my own lifestyle when I choose my baby buggy, for example, or am I consuming and buying somebody else’s identity without knowing it? And if my identity is bound up with these symbolic tokens, is it actually anything more than a cleverly marketed brand?

I just want to just pause there and underline it for one second. We must not be deceived. In a consumer society, there is a vested interest in ensuring that acquisition and personhood are deeply connected. Consequently, what we actually think of as freedom of choice may rapidly become dependency. We become dependent on consumption for meaning as human beings.

¹² Scot McKnight, Author, *The King Jesus Gospel*, Professor of New Testament.

¹³ Krish Kandiah, President, London School of Theology, Founder, Home for Good.

¹⁴ James Houston, Professor Emeritus & Co-founder, Regent College.

Identity packages, they always do come with small print. Having chosen certain tokens, certain kinds of behaviours, then we get obligated to them. [For example:] “I need a certain kind of residential location to reflect who I really am and who my children really are going to be.” But it may just be that in the future, every decision I ever make is made with reference to my mortgage. And it may just be that every person I go on to meet, I judge them by the same value criteria that I applied to my own situation.

This is a very well disguised form of slavery. Eugene Peterson points out in his book, *Traveling Light*, which is a set of reflections on the book of Galatians, “We have more freedom, but we’re less free.”

There’s a big problem right at the centre of this way of thinking about identity. And that’s the problem of suffering. This kind of identity formation doesn’t have any resilience in the face of suffering. And at some point, what we find, I think in every human life, is that we just can’t invent anymore. Somebody, some thing, gets in the way of us being who we want to be, or who we were once, and we’d like to maintain that identity. And we can’t control that somebody or that something. And if our identities are founded on those external here-and-now aspects of our lives, they are incredibly fragile.

If this is the way that consumerism works, what other ways does our society shape and define identity?

“The question of identity is very, very important because it affects everything about how we live and what sense of vocation that we actually have. Vocation actually comes out of identity, not the other way around. So, often times in a party or something people will ask you, ‘What do you do?’ ‘Well, I’m a professor.’ ‘Oh, I know who you are.’ Well, you don’t know who I am.”¹⁵

“It’s true that in the whole western world, the Boomer generation has been the most professionalized in the history of mankind. And so, in consequence, what the

¹⁵ Paul Stevens, Professor Emeritus, Marketplace Theology, Regent College.

Boomer generation is discovering is the disenchantment of having only a professional identity. It's a wrong identity. Well, having been a CEO of a big company, or being a scholar in an academic life, to then discover that you're nobody, is what is waking up people to say, 'Was I a fool to think that my identity was only professional?'"¹⁶

"St. Augustine had a wonderful idea. He said, "If you want to find out who a person is, don't ask them what they do, ask them what they love."¹⁷

The Christian gospel can't coexist with a materialistic philosophy, because being always precedes doing. We've been lovingly created – I have been lovingly created – before I ever achieved or acquired or consumed anything. And my fundamental dignity as a person is not dependent on what I do, is not dependent on what I invest, or what kind of image I project. And as we come to see Jesus, we start to see that we do not have to strive to acquire a self. That is a radical statement in our culture. I don't have to invent myself out of a multitude of options, nor do you. Rather, I can receive what's been given to me, with gratitude and peace.

Fluidity

Post-modern identities are not static, they are not stable, they can change within a decade, they can change within a year, less than a year. As technology keeps on shifting the ground rules for human formation, identity formation has to keep up. It must be progressive, successive, multi-faceted. And what that leaves us with is a protracted existential crisis. I never stop asking, "Who am I?" That question's meant to settle us; it's meant to still us in the core of who we are, and to free us into our God-given purpose. But what's happened, is the question itself has become a restless obsession in its own right. We are tyrannized by it, in our souls.

"The cultural message, heavily influenced by social sciences, and heavily influenced by psychology, is, we have a very, very strong attention paid now to the intrapsychic aspect of who we are, to the private and the internal side of who we are,

¹⁶ James Houston.

¹⁷ Paul Stevens.

so, language like, 'be true to yourself,' or 'finding yourself,' or 'being yourself,' is all language that appeals to something internal, or intrapsychic, of who I am, that I need to be. And so, the great defense for a whole bunch of things now in the culture, whether it's ethical or moral or religious, is, 'Well that's who I am.' And if you actually dissect that sentence, you know, from a grammatical standpoint, like 'That's who I am,' it says absolutely nothing. You can be an axe murderer, and you say, 'Well, that's who I am.' It doesn't tell us anything; it's not an identity that's deeply rooted in anything substantive. And it's not an identity that ties to any bigger picture or bigger story. It's kind of this isolated fragment of individual."¹⁸

"The identity should be something that is integral and unchanging. Changing in terms of maturity and stages of life, but nevertheless, it's the same. And so, one of the features of the post-modern world is the fluidity of its culture, and therefore the fluidity of its identities. It's almost as if we're floating around and we can pick and choose like a Halloween costume, which one we're going to wear today. The narcissistic culture that we're living in, is a culture of a depleted sense of self. And when you have a depleted sense of self, you're totally self-focused about your own insecurity."¹⁹

"I think one of the lacks in the culture is a real debate of what it means to be human. And I think the culture right now, in its advertising and in its messaging, gives us this very strong sense that we need to be the best parents, the best neighbours, the best citizens, the best this, and then, your brokenness then gets very much hidden from view. So, all the quiet addictions, the quiet depression, the quiet angst, the quiet marital struggles, the quiet parental struggles are really, I think, pretty pronounced in the culture. And so, a lot of people haven't..., because their life is so fragmented, so privatized, they're living with all this private pain. They don't know what to do with it; they don't know where to place it."²⁰

¹⁸ Rod Wilson, Professor of Counseling & Psychology, President, Regent College.

¹⁹ James Houston.

²⁰ Rod Wilson.

It's a heavy, heavy weight of responsibility on our shoulders, to invent your own unique identity, especially when you have to do that autonomously as an individual. You're on your own in it, and there's nothing to guide, but internal preference. So, decision-making cripples us with anxiety. The stakes are just too high. What happens if you make a wrong decision? And this is causing paralysis in our culture. And yet, Jesus Christ, in this fluid culture, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's constant. He's faithful. And he's constant in every vicissitude of our lives. (I love that word: vicissitude – every season of our lives, he's constant.) And that's true in our lives, but it's true throughout all the ages, through all of history, through all of time. And in this age of fluidity, in this age of obsolescence, there is nothing more precious for us than the eternal stability and the permanence that we have in Christ.

Dislocation, invention, fluidity, and finally, the final characteristic of our identity culture: constraint.

Constraint

Diverse identities can create social conflict. And the eclectic society, full of these multi-form and shifting identities, has to be held together. It needs structural and political coherence, and our glue for that is a language of neutrality and toleration. That cardinal rule that runs right through the middle of political discourse, the backbone: you can choose whatever you like, so long as you do not interfere with my choices. Now, it's really important that we say here, and I want to say here, there is tremendous good that comes from that kind of plurality. I'm not opposing pluralism here, but what I am trying to say, is that when it comes to identity, at home I can select infinitely, but in the public realm I cannot make a definitive statement. So, what happens is we're trapped between hyper-subjectivity on the one hand, and hyper-conformity, or uniformity, on the other. That's a torn life. That's a fracturing of integrity. And the church bears the brunt of that fracture in our society. The church always sits, always sits on the boundary between the personal and the public. As Christian communities, we're trying to bring these spheres together. Isn't that what we're trying to do? We're trying to bring together something that our society is trying to rip apart.

“I think most Christians wind up with a kind of compartmentalized life. And we move from one compartment to the next and faith takes place in one compartment of our

lives, usually the private – the sphere of leisure. It's usually at home, on the weekends, after hours. That's the space where it's permissible to be religious. And then, there's this other big compartment of our lives which is where we work, where that private faith we have doesn't really find a place; it's not really welcome. We believe, as Christians, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all of life, not just part of it – not just the private sphere, but the public sphere as well. The gospel applies to everything. And this artificial division between life into public sphere and the private sphere, creates a huge problem for Christians. It feels like we're betraying our faith.²¹

Conclusion

So, we have four words to characterize our contemporary society or framework: dislocation, invention, fluidity, constraint. In conclusion, really briefly, let me suggest that this post-modern identity crisis shouldn't really surprise us because we were made to know who we are, we were designed to know. And that's true at a personal level, an individual level, but it's also true at a societal level. God's revealed himself to us as "I Am". That's his name: "I am". That's the ultimate existential question. And the question, "Who am I?", it gets settled once and for all in that statement. We are because he is.

So, be located in the story – the biblical story, in which God reveals himself – his character and his life. Be located in the story of the people of God through time. Receive the gift of identity. Don't be afraid of suffering; it's not going to undermine you; it might hurt you, but it's not going to undermine your identity. Be constant in fluidity. And be courageous in the face of constraint.

Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed through the renewing of your minds.

What happens when we embrace God's story as our story, Christ's identity as our identity?

"God wants to make us more ourselves. The difficulty is that sometimes we have a wrong sense of what it means to be ourselves. There is some sort of thing that if you peel it way like a bunch of onion peels, then you're going to find the true me, the true

²¹ Craig Gay, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Regent College.

self. Scripture says, no, that's not how you find yourselves; you're not going to find who you are by peeling away onion peels. It's something quite different. You keep your mind that the end goal is to be Christ, to be in Christ. When we become Christ-like, we share in his way of being truly human, then we become really ourselves."²²

“When you have a strong sense of identity, as we have in Christ, then we have an identity that gives us all the space to be concerned about the other. So, then our life is much more concerned with othering – that we live in the light of the other. So, we have a very different perspective on life because when one is secure in the love of God, then you have an ultimate security. And so, I think the consequence is now, in the 21st century, we're starting again. We are, in fact, reframing our vision of things.”²³

In the midst of her own crisis of identity, Christine Buchholz was challenged to rediscover her identity in Christ.

“My paradigm started to shift, and I felt like God really started breaking idols in my life. I didn't realize that I had had this idol of materialism. So, I started to value people differently as I was shattering this notion that you're more valuable if you make more money, you're more valuable if you've gone to a great college, and just seeing, enjoying people for who they were and not for what they had accomplished – the financial or socio-economic status. We walk around in this broken world and so we have these hurts and these pains, and we think that's who we are sometimes, but I believe that the truth that God offers to us through Jesus is that, no, we are healed, we are whole, we are created in God's image.”²⁴

The biblical story challenges the world's definitions of identity and presents a radically different vision of reality and purpose. But how well do we know this story? The disciples on the Emmaus road thought they knew the biblical story, but couldn't see Jesus in their midst.

²² Hans Boersma, Professor of Theology, Regent College.

²³ James Houston.

²⁴ Christine Buchholz.

Over the next five episodes, we'll be exploring the big chapters of Scripture. If we want to be a blessing to the world, and not be conformed by the patterns of the world, we need to be located in the biblical story and see Jesus in our everyday lives.