

WHO AM I?

HUMAN IDENTITY AND THE GOSPEL IN A CONFUSING WORLD

Following

Jesus

“A fantastically helpful book”
ANDY BANNISTER

THOMAS FRETWELL

DayOne

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Cover design by Sarah Fretwell

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To my Dad,
an example of sacrificial love.
'As a father . . . so the LORD' (Psalm 103:13).

I have read many books by many good authors on subjects similar to those in Tommy Fretwell's book Who Am I? and I believe that this book ranks right up there with the best of them. This book is excellent for those who believe. But it is also relevant for those who have yet to believe that there is a God who made them, loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives. I highly recommend it!

Brian Brodersen, Pastor, Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, CA, USA

This book explores fundamental questions about human existence, identity, purpose and a relationship with God. Despite drawing on a strong scholarly background (the author holds two degrees in theology and is currently engaged in doctoral research), Thomas Fretwell offers a highly accessible and clear treatment of key theological, apologetic, philosophical and cultural issues. As such, this book is a must-read for everyday Christians seeking to understand, live and share their faith in today's rapidly changing culture. It will also be of considerable interest to non-Christians grappling with some of the questions it explores.

Dr Calvin Smith, Principal of King's Evangelical Divinity School, UK

Discovering the true nature, meaning and purpose of life has been mankind's desire since the dawn of antiquity. Many have attempted an answer, whether theists or non-theists. Who am I? tackles this vital subject in a uniquely refreshing fashion. The author is adept in his treatment of matters historical, philosophical, sociological and theological, even weaving in some of his own compelling fictional writing along the way. Well documented but contemporary in its feel, this book takes the

reader on a rich journey of exploration into the nature of human identity, inexorably leading to the full-orbed realization that the answers reside in a Person—the One who epitomized a fulfilled life and is its ultimate Source.

Philip Bell, CEO, CMI-UK/Europe

A great man once said that the two most important studies are what a person is and what God is. He then stated that you can know what a person is only by knowing what God is. In this book, with biblical wisdom, with intelligent readings of our culture and with brilliantly chosen examples of its arguments, Thomas Fretwell shows the enduring wisdom of this observation. The question of identity is still our starting question. Who are we? Why? Want to know? Yes, you do: you're a person. To find yourself, you must know the One who put you here. You'd do very well to start here.

Ben Virgo, Director, Christian Heritage, London

What is a human being? Are we just random collocations of atoms, nothing more than a pack of neurons, or genetic puppets dancing to our DNA? Unless we properly know what (or who) we are we can't begin to tackle the bigger questions of life's meaning and purpose. Tommy Fretwell tackles these questions head-on in this fantastically helpful book, and whether you're a sceptic or a seeker, a doubter or a disciple, he'll help you see why the good news of Jesus offers the securest foundation for that most important of questions: what does it mean to be human?

Andy Bannister, apologist and director of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity, Dundee, UK

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	8
2	Who am I?	17
3	Mirror, mirror, on the wall	34
4	I am created	63
5	I am flawed	115
6	I am redeemed	132
7	I am loved	143
8	I am adopted	163
9	I am called	179
10	Afterword	188

1 Introduction

Who am I? Just three words—six letters—make up this question. Yet the attempts to find a satisfying answer have produced enough words to fill countless libraries. To answer the question of who we are, we also need to ask: What are we? What does it mean to be human? Do we have a grand purpose, an end game towards which our lives are heading? Will anything we do have any real, lasting significance, or do we simply live a certain number of days on this planet before we cease to exist? During this time must we seek to carve out some sort of meaning for ourselves? If we live another forty years, that is only about 14,500 days. Start counting!

The implications of these questions are so far-reaching that they demand our attention. All over the globe today top universities are holding conferences and seeking answers from the brightest minds about what it means to be human. Experts from many disciplines have attempted to answer this question. Yet why is it that no consistent answer can be found? It seems odd that humans have been on this planet for so long, yet we still cannot answer even this fundamental question.

Who am I? Now before you simply dismiss this question as some abstract philosophical concept or see it as a question reserved for edgy teenagers, we must admit that problems of identity surface at all ages and in many different circumstances. In fact, answering these questions has an immensely practical side. This becomes clear in the way

we navigate the daily decisions we have to make, as well as respond to the issues thrust upon us by our culture.

The way we approach our personal relationships, sexual ethics, issues of human rights, justice, and ultimately how we decide between right and wrong are intricately tied up in the concept of what it means to be human. These broad categories will play out in our lives in routine ways. For example, should I forgive that person who wronged me? Should I support this war? What political party should I support? Am I all alone? What should I watch on Netflix?

IS THERE MEANING TO LIFE?

All these issues, one way or another, relate back to three foundational principles: meaning, value and purpose. Do we as human beings have any ultimate meaning to our lives? Do we have any intrinsic worth? And for what purpose are we living? For centuries debate has raged in our culture around these issues. Perhaps the sharpest divide has been between those who accept the existence of God and those who reject God.

As polarized as these two sides may be, there is no denying that these questions are being raised by many different people, whether religious or not. The Internet search engine Ask Jeeves compiled a list of what it called the top 10 ‘unanswerable’ questions of the past decade. The list was based on some 1.1 billion queries made on the site. Fascinatingly, the question ranked at number one was, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, with question number two being, ‘Is there a God?’ People are searching for meaning and it seems we have a natural propensity to seek this meaning in some transcendent cause outside of ourselves. Most people

understand that the reality of God would provide meaning to their lives. The connection people have made is accurate. From a Christian perspective, it is easy to see how life is given objective meaning, value and purpose by the existence of God. Perhaps the simplest summary is found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ and answers, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.’ In addition, as beings created in the image of God, for the purpose of communing with God, our lives are endowed with inherent dignity and value.

Of course, without God there is no transcendent being to endow our lives with any ultimate meaning or purpose, a fact that has not gone unrecognized by many of the world’s leading atheists. Consider the words of Bertrand Russell, one of the best-known atheists of the past generation:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation be safely built.¹

A more contemporary voice with the same message is atheist Alex Rosenberg. In his book *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*

he says, ‘What is the purpose of the universe? There is none. What is the meaning of life? Ditto . . . Does history have any meaning or purpose? It’s full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’²

Truly the future looks bleak from this vantage point! Despite recognizing that this worldview is unliveable, many atheists will still try to deny the logical conclusion that a universe without God is meaningless. Here they encounter a problem: in atheism the universe is a closed system; it is like a box with the lid firmly closed. They cannot appeal to some transcendent cause outside the box for meaning, so they must find meaning within. As the film director Stanley Kubrick once put it, ‘The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meaning. However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.’³ The late atheist Christopher Hitchens described how he responded to Christians who quizzed him about how he found meaning in life: ‘A life that partakes even a little of friendship, love, irony, humour, parenthood, literature, and music, and the chance to take part in battles for the liberation of others cannot be called “meaningless”.’⁴

An immediate question arises from this: what of lives that never have these things? Can they then be called meaningless? These categories are totally arbitrary and subjective. What is to stop someone else providing a different list of things that supposedly give their life meaning? What if their list contained something objectionable to you—say, the eradication of a particular people group? Suddenly the ‘meaning of life’ has taken a turn for the worse! But the only way to differentiate between their list and your list would be to smuggle in some objective values from outside the box. Nobel Prize-winning

physicist and atheist Steven Weinberg concludes his book *The First Three Minutes* by stating that human life is ‘a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes’ and that the universe is doomed to face a ‘future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat’. Yet still he tries to find a silver lining in what this means for mankind, saying, ‘The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.’⁵

Given that he is an atheist physicist, it should come as no surprise that he extols the scientific endeavour as that which can provide life with a small measure of fulfilment and meaning, but what of the average person who works a regular nine-to-five job and may not believe in God? How can they lift their existence above the level of farce? Weinberg is quite right in describing this view of humanity as a ‘tragedy’. It is no wonder that many of the early French existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus reasoned that if God does not exist, life is absurd—and, more than that, positively cruel. In light of this, Camus reasoned, the only real philosophical answer is suicide. Tragically, many who have struggled with these issues, particularly among the younger generation, have seen this as a very real option.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

So who cares? Why does it matter what makes us human, and how does that concern us now as we struggle to understand ourselves amongst the joys and pains of life? It matters because what is true of us collectively impacts us individually. The understanding of who we are as humans—whether a random

collection of atoms or a uniquely designed creature—forms the foundation of our identity. The question of how God relates to the issue of identity is pivotal and is something we cannot get away from, no matter how hard we try. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote these words: ‘He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end’ (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We were made with eternity in our hearts—that is, we are specifically intended to find our ultimate meaning and fulfilment by living in accord with what we have been designed for: to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever. Either we deny God but still end up smuggling in certain objective categories that come from God, or we take the claims of Christ seriously: we investigate what it is He says about human nature, and we discover that the truth about who we are, or what we can be in Him, is even more glorious than we could ever have imagined.

Finding our true identity is tied up with answering the question which Jesus first asked his disciple Peter: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Matthew 16:15). Matthew’s Gospel records that Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ It was upon this expression of Peter’s faith that Jesus said He would build the church. The foundation of the church is a recognition of the true identity of Jesus.

This question is crucial. If you have answered it in a similar way to Peter, with an expression of trust and acceptance of who Christ is and what He has done for you, then your position and your identity are, like Peter’s, totally entwined with Christ. This identity is more beautiful than any self-conceived image or any identity fashioned in this world could

ever be. In this book we will explore the question of human identity and look at what the ‘riches of [God’s] grace, which he lavished upon us’ (Ephesians 1:7–8) truly are. This will involve examining some life-changing truths, along with confronting some of the more uncomfortable facts about ourselves.

My hope is that, in the end, you will be able to see that the identity Jesus offers is the only one that matters. More than that, compared with what the world can offer, compared with any identity cobbled together from items solely ‘inside the box’, the identity available through a relationship with Christ far surpasses them all. This identity relates to every area of your life. It weaves together your past, your present and your future in a way that only an all-knowing God can do, infusing every moment, the good and the bad, with everlasting significance.

Perhaps you have never considered how you might answer Jesus’ question; it had never occurred to you that this question is even related to discovering who you are. Maybe you are simply struggling amidst turbulent situations in your life, seeking acceptance and belonging or going through pain or grief, and wondering ‘Why?’ Any number of circumstances in life can cause us to search for meaning and a true understanding of who we are. If this is you, I believe there is only one solution that can provide a satisfactory answer to these questions: Jesus. You see, if Christ is who He claims to be, and God exists, it changes everything. He exists eternally ‘outside the box’, yet in the person of Christ He voluntarily entered ‘the box’ in order to rescue us from our predicament and to tell us the truth about who we are

and what our purpose in existing right now really is. Jesus Himself highlighted this point when He said, ‘For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to *bear witness to the truth*. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice’ (John 18:37).⁶

The truth is that God made this world to be inhabited by us (Isaiah 45:18), and He created man for His glory (Isaiah 43:6–7) and to enjoy Him for ever (Psalm 16:11). He is the Author of life (Acts 3:15) and therefore the only one who can give us a truthful description of who we are (Romans 3:23). He knows us intimately (Matthew 10:30), cares for us immeasurably (1 Peter 5:7), loves us unconditionally (Romans 5:8) and offers us an abundant life (John 10:10). Such a life can only be realized by living in relationship with the one who made us—through correctly answering the question ‘Who do you say that I am?’

That is the *truth*!

NOTES OVERLEAF ➡

Notes

- 1 Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic: Including a Free Man's Worship* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986), pp. 10–11.
- 2 Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 3.
- 3 Quoted in Maria Popova, 'Stanley Kubrick on Mortality, the Fear of Flying, and the Purpose of Existence: 1968 Playboy Interview', BrainPickings, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/07/26/stanley-kubrick-playboy-interview/>.
- 4 Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic, 2011), p. 331.
- 5 Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), pp. 154–155.
- 6 All emphasis in Scripture quotes throughout the book has been added.

2 Who am I?

The novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo is considered one of the greatest literary works of the nineteenth century. It has been adapted for both stage and screen multiple times, becoming the longest-running musical ever. You may have seen the musical or watched the 2012 screen adaptation starring Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. The story touches on some fascinating subjects as it examines the intersection of law and grace through the lives of the convict Jean Valjean (Jackman) and police inspector Javert (Crowe). Jean Valjean is an ex-convict who escaped his punishment and is being relentlessly pursued across France by Javert, who is intent on bringing him to justice. Along the way Jean Valjean is shown mercy by a bishop who encourages him to turn his life around. Years later he takes these words to heart and under an alias, Monsieur Madeleine, he becomes a changed man. Rising to prominence in the city, he becomes known for his charitable works, is elected mayor of the city and rejuvenates its economy, creating many jobs for the people.

During one climactic scene Jean Valjean, under his alias, is confronted by Inspector Javert, who informs him that they have in custody a man Javert believes is the convict Valjean. Rather than allow an innocent man to be punished in his place, Valjean turns himself in to Javert. The intense struggle within Valjean as he prepares to make known his true identity to Javert is captured in the song ‘Who Am I?’

Who am I?
Can I conceal myself for evermore?
Pretend I'm not the man I was before? . . .

Who am I? Who am I?
I'm Jean Valjean!

IDENTITY CRISIS

Jean Valjean was tormented by his past, always afraid that someone would find out his real identity and expose his life as a lie. We live in an era of secret identities. Popular superhero characters such as Batman, Superman and Spiderman all draw us into a world of fantasy where we can escape from reality and assume an alter ego. How often do we talk about Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent or Peter Parker? It is the fantasy identity we desire. The imagination is an amazing thing, but there is a danger that comes with it. With the advent of social media, it is all too easy to experiment with different identities. On-screen, we may present to people a completely different image from the person we really are. A few people might wonder what their 'true' sexual orientation is and experiment with an alternative identity for a period of time. Others might wish to experience a jet-setting lifestyle that will be the envy of their friends. Such is our consumerist age where we imagine there is a plethora of acceptable 'identities' available to us and we can simply pick and choose the one we like, or at least present to others the one we feel we should have.

This was graphically illustrated for me on a train journey to London. It was early afternoon and two girls were sitting opposite me and my family. They were dressed up ready for a

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> **WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BE HUMAN?**

> **WHAT IS IT THAT
MAKES US SO UNIQUE?**

> **IS THERE ANY
MEANING TO LIFE?**

Many of the most important decisions you make in life will be shaped by how you answer these questions. In order to understand the problems of an increasingly confused world, it is vital to have clear answers to these issues.

This book will provide those answers by examining human nature in light of the Word of God. It will demonstrate the difference the Gospel message makes in the way you understand human identity.

“ I have read many books by many good authors on this subject, and I believe this book ranks right up there with the best of them.

> **BRIAN BRODERSEN**
PASTOR, CALVARY CHAPEL COSTA MESA, CA, USA

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> **BEN VIRGO**
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Thomas Fretwell, BTh and MA (Theology), is currently undertaking PhD research. An engaging speaker and host of the Theology & Apologetics podcast, he is a tutor in Theology at King's Evangelical Divinity School and an associate speaker with Creation Ministries International. He also serves on the pastoral team at Calvary Chapel, Hastings.

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