



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 28, 2015

Who Are You?

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 2, 2015

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you (John 14:15-17).

Do you ever stop to ask yourself, Who am I?

I don't mean some deep philosophical speculation. Most people have no interest in that sort of thing, but I mean something very practical. I mean, who are you in the sense of what sort of person are you? What motivates you to do what you do? What do you really care about, as reflected in the way you spend your time and talent and treasure?

Lots of people never ask themselves those questions of identity and purpose; they're just too busy doing whatever it is they do. They have careers to work on, kids to raise, friends and family to hang out with, hobbies and interests to pursue, and endless options for entertainment to absorb whatever energy and attention are left after all those other things. Some people can use up a whole lifetime just doing one thing after another without ever asking why, or wondering what sort of person they're becoming in the process.

People may spend a whole life that way, but there's a kind of thoughtlessness about an unexamined life, and it tends to shrink people's perspective down to the immediate interests of themselves and those closest to them. That's what we might expect from an evolutionary

perspective: a world full of individuals seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, gathered into families and tribes for security, and competing with other families and tribes who want the same sorts of things for themselves.

Unlike some Christians in America, I think evolutionary theory explains a great deal, not only about our biological origins but also about human nature. Much of our social and political life, not to mention our psychology, makes perfect sense in light of evolution. But Christianity calls us beyond our natural inclinations. Jesus tells us we were made for more. We were made to be sons and daughters of God. We were made to reflect the image of our magnificent Creator in this world, made to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. That's the whole reason we're here. It's the fundamental purpose of being human.

Truth be told, though, much of what we were made for does not come naturally to us in this world. Left to our own devices we're not very good at loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, or loving our neighbors as ourselves—at least not more than a handful of neighbors in fairly close proximity.

Many of us identify with a particular tribe of some sort, people more or less like ourselves, and the tribe becomes an important part of who we think we are. Tribal allegiances help to account for what people believe and what sorts of claims they're willing or unwilling to consider. I've already mentioned evolution. In some Christian churches the assumption is that if you're really a Christian you can't believe in evolution, even if scientists are all but

unanimous in claiming that it's true.

Climate science is like that too. Pope Francis just came out with an encyclical saying that it's important to address the issue from a Christian perspective, and we'll say more about that another time. Meanwhile, I was reminded of an interview I read not long ago about a climate scientist who is also an evangelical Christian and a political conservative. She says, like more than 95 percent of climate scientists, that the evidence is overwhelming that humans contribute significantly to climate change, and we need to figure out what to do about that soon or else there will be serious consequences. What's so interesting, she says, is that when she shares the evidence in some of the circles she belongs to she often gets a puzzled response. People say, "But we're conservative Christians. We don't believe in that, do we?" Their concern is not focused mainly on the weight of the evidence but on what they think it's okay or not okay to believe in their particular tribe.

Tribal allegiance is so powerful that it filters what people are willing to consider about all sorts of things. Dan Ariely is an Israeli-born economist at Duke who tells about studies he and other economists and psychologists have done on this subject. In both Israel and the United States, they presented brief descriptions of policy proposals to people of different political parties. The very same language was used, but the proposals were attributed to opposite parties for experimental groups and control groups. It turns out that strong majorities were more likely to favor a proposal if they thought it came from their own party than if it came from the opposite party, even though

the language was identical. So great is our need to belong, and so pervasive is the tendency to boil issues down to something simple and congenial to our other interests, that many people won't seriously consider the evidence if they think it conflicts with tribal loyalty.

This same thing plays out in religion, too, in a couple of ways. Some people's religion is their main tribal allegiance and they tend to be wary of, or even hostile to, people of other faiths. That, of course, feeds all sorts of religious conflicts in the world, sadly carried on in the name of God. But many other people shrink their religious commitment down to fit within their other commitments—political or social or economic. Some people's version of Christianity is just a subset of their conservative or liberal worldview, and they trim away any aspects of the faith that don't fit their larger interests. That's how religion gets coopted so often in the service of other agendas, whether it's with Islam in the Middle East or Christianity in America.

All of this brings us back to the original question: Who are you? What really motivates you? What sets the agenda for the way you want to live?

Jesus says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments," and he summarizes those commandments as truly loving God, loving our neighbors—all our neighbors—as ourselves, and treating others as we want to be treated. If loving Jesus and following his commandments really does set the agenda for our lives, then we truly are disciples of Jesus. If something else sets our basic agenda, we may call ourselves Christians but Jesus himself might say one day,

“Who are you? I never knew you.” That’s what he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

The truth is, we’re not very good at discipleship, left to our own devices. We have too many other interests and competing agendas. Our hearts are divided, even when part of us wants to follow Jesus. But the gospel is good news after all. We can’t be faithful followers of Jesus all by ourselves, but we don’t have to be. God will help us to be and to do what God wants from us, and what God wants for us.

Jesus says, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, a Helper, to be with you forever.” The Holy Spirit can give us a new heart, put a new spirit within us, so that we really do want what God wants. And since we were made to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, the spirit God gives us will bring deeper joy and greater fulfillment than we could ever achieve on our own.

This is the Spirit of truth, Jesus says, but the world cannot receive him because the world has other interests. The world is all caught up in self-interest, and party interests, and tribal loyalties of every kind. If those are the things that really motivate people, the things that drive their actions and priorities, they won’t have much interest in being driven by the Spirit of God. But you will know the Spirit, Jesus tells his disciples, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Paul says something very interesting about all this. In the letter to the Philippians he says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” It’s a great paradox at the heart of the Christian life. We have to work, and work hard, at following Jesus, because our hearts are divided and we have other interests. But at the same time it is God who is at work in us, and God will help us to overcome our selfish impulses and look beyond our tribal allegiances, until bit by bit our very nature is transformed and we become in Christ a new creation.

We are amphibians, as C. S. Lewis liked to say. We’re rising up out of our purely physical nature and coming into the new land of our spiritual nature. And this new land, the kingdom of heaven, is our true home. It’s what we were made for, and finding it will tell us at last who we really are, and why we are here.



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