

you're only human

How Your Limits Reflect God's Design
and Why That's Good News

KELLY M. KAPIC



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

is identity purely self-generated?

understanding the self in context

Discovering my own identity doesn't mean I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. . . . My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.

Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism:
Examining the Politics of Recognition*

Western culture tends to define personal identity by isolating the person from all context. The Christian faith always understands the person as finite and necessarily in connection: with God, with other persons, with the creation at large, and within the person. Because sin distorts both our internal world and external relations, restoration requires that we understand our connectivity and view ourselves as objects of God's love and delight.

DESPITE OUR CULTURE'S CALLS to "be true to yourself" and "just be you," that same culture often interferes with our attempts to know who we are. Although these calls are worded in terms of liberation, they often produce far more restlessness and self-doubt than clarity. In addition to

offering platitudes as substitutes for wisdom, Western culture has acquired several mistaken assumptions about personal identity that we need to examine and correct.

Simplistic assumptions in our Christian culture also get in the way: for example, calls to find one's "identity in Christ" apart from a robust doctrine of creation can produce problems. When we spiritualize in a non-creation-affirming way, we often universalize and abstract, failing to appreciate how human creatures are shaped in real time and space. The fact that my identity must be in Christ doesn't change the fact that I am *this* person and not that one, that I am from here and not there, and that I have this history and these relationships and not those. We also tend to mistake our natural human limits as faults we must overcome. But when our search for identity in Christ includes a healthy view of creaturely finitude and particularity, then we see something truly beautiful and unique take shape. The church starts to look like it was meant to look: diverse, united, gracious, and most of all, loving. All in and around Christ!

One sign that we neglect the biblical picture of human finitude as part of our identity is when we suppose that diversity is purely about political correctness rather than a theological value. But a healthy Christian view of human limits and differences encourages mutual delight, an awareness of our dependence on others, the integrity of relationships, and contentment. Christian conceptions of creation allow us to value our particularity without failing to appreciate what people from different cultures and experiences bring; it allows us to recognize our common humanity without assuming that solidarity requires sameness. As we will see, we can and should value our particularity while seeing this as related to our communities, culture, and history, rather than simply my own self-choosing.

So, how do we go about knowing ourselves? That is a question worth asking yet again, but it is going to take some time to provide more than a cliché for an answer. We will need to think seriously about connections, dependence, and responsibility. Let's begin with what is undeniable but far too often ignored . . . *you have a belly button.*

Sartre and Belly Buttons

Just days away from leaving for Christmas break, I look out at the exhausted faces of my students. Many of them will soon head home. They can't wait

to sleep! But experience tells me that going home is not necessarily a blessing for each of them. Often such trips mean returning to dysfunctional relationships, or at least complicated family dynamics. They may love their parents, but that doesn't mean it is always easy, and sometimes it is painfully difficult. Others head home with joy and expectation: since absence often does make the heart grow fonder (or at least forgetful!), and they have fairly healthy relationships with their folks, warm feelings of anticipation fill them. And yet . . .

It doesn't take more than a few days, no matter the background, for the average young adult to become irritated with Dad—the way he breathes so loud, is always late, or is incredibly awkward in public. Or maybe Mom, whose questions were welcomed at first but now feel intrusive and tiresome . . . plus her fashion is embarrassing. Whatever the reason, within a few days the college student has often returned to the struggle of relating to their parents. Inhabiting the same shared space together can quickly become surprisingly difficult, and it can frustrate and unnerve all involved. Mom and Dad's presence has jeopardized the student's sense of independence and identity, and it tempts them to either bolt or just shut down.

Drawing from former Duke professors Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, I give my students a homework assignment for over the break. It is a dangerous one. If you don't listen to the whole thing, it can just sound creepy! After being home for a bit, as the frustrations emerge and the distance between student and parent threatens to grow, I encourage them to take a shower. And while they are in the shower, they need to look down at their . . . belly button! Why? Because during these times of growing pains with one's parents, it is all too easy in today's Western culture for us to imagine that we are self-made people. Hauerwas and Willimon, when exploring the biblical commandment to honor your parents, explain: "Nothing is quite as ontologically revealing as our belly button. . . . By noting that we are creatures, creations of mothers and fathers, the Decalogue tells us that we have life as a gift. We are begotten, not manufactured. Someone even changed our diapers, our first hint of what grace must be like. No wonder some of us despise our parents, for they are a visible, ever-present reminder that we were created, that the significance of our lives is not exclusively self-derived."¹

This view differs profoundly from what Western society currently believes. Whether or not the average person knows the names of philosophers

like Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1929–80), our culture has absorbed their axiom, “Existence precedes essence.”² That is, we *make* our meaning; we *don’t* receive it. This gives great dignity to our choices, but it can foster the illusion that we are born as blank slates, devaluing the immense significance that our biological and social backgrounds have in shaping who we are.

As Sartre concludes: “*Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.* That is the first principle of existentialism.”³ Existentialism may not remain popular as a formal philosophy, but in our psychological and cultural assumptions, its power still lingers and continues to influence us. We love the idea that you make yourself: Be whoever you want to be. Don’t let any person, culture, or religion tell you who you are. No, you simply exist. You are thrown into a raging and tumultuous ocean, and it is now all up to you to make something of it and of yourself.

Isn’t this honest, courageous, and impressively bold? Isn’t this Frenchman just having the guts to tell us what is really the case, avoiding the fairy tale of a deity that breeds passivity and instead calling us to the audacious action of self-determination?

As appealing as Sartre was to me as a teenager (and I still think there is much to learn from him), I now find him far less heroic than I originally did. This is partly because I see the consequences for those who grow up thinking they have to *create* their own meaning, their own value. I’ve personally felt it. This vision can be so enormous and exhausting. Sartre can be hurtful because he speaks a grain of truth while embedding that grain within a matrix of error.

Yes, as we live we shape our lives. We change. To that extent, our actions bring about a new form of being, and in that way *existence precedes essence*. But that does not happen in a vacuum or apart from a larger context. Maybe putting this in terms of two contrasting options can prove helpful. Are we (a) individual isolated units in a godless world, or are we (b) somehow vitally connected to God and each other, and is this connection the very foundation of our identity? Sartre picks the first option and undervalues how dependent on others we really are. As becomes clear throughout this book, I think that this view naively contradicts reality and that following it actually hurts us, given how God designed human creatures.

Back to the belly button and parents. In the shower, each of us is reminded of something that is as obvious as it is profound: *we owe our very existence*

Good
4

to others. We all have biological parents: we are part of a genealogy and have received a particular DNA. The belly button, as Hauerwas and Wilimon argue, has profound theological importance. It is our body's way of reminding us that we are not self-made people, we are not separate islands, we are not merely rugged individuals. Instead, we are inevitably and neces-

But God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts.

Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*

sarily bound together with others: it has been so from the beginning and will always be. Each of us is someone's child, whether we know their names or not. All of us owe our existence not simply to God but to other human creatures.

Once we start to ponder it, we realize that our whole lives, from our food to our shelter, from our health to our incomes—all of it in-

volves the interdependence of human beings. Why? Because we are finite creatures. And the gift of these relationships with God, others, and even the earth, is meant to provide the matrix for self-understanding, giving our lives meaning and purpose no matter what our socioeconomic status. Ironically, only when I stop thinking of myself as chiefly an isolated center of consciousness and begin to consider my identity in terms of my relationships to others can I start to see clearly who I am.

The Self in Social Context

Historically—and it is still true today in much of the non-Western world—the default way people viewed themselves (the "self") was through their social relations. Who am I? I am a daughter or son from this family that does this trade and lives in this land.⁴ Identity was essentially found through social and physical location and networks rather than through introspection. Questions of identity were less about solitary figures and far more about communities and connections. *Who* you were was all about *whose* you were (your parents, clan, land, etc.). There were some good results in that (e.g., relationships connected people) and some bad (e.g., sinful power structures often distorted and abused those relationships).⁵ Negatively, this could mean an individual was lost in the crowd, not able to develop any distinctive gifts

but always forced into a mold of sameness. Positively, when functioning well, social identity meant a person was never alone or carried the burden of self-actualization, but instead could find contentment in belonging and contribution to the common good. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop reflects on such cultural instincts: "The strong concept of community means that the common good takes precedence over the individual good."⁶ By contrast, our strong tendency in the West to focus on our internal world alone can prevent us from realizing just how much we are shaped by the social webs around us.

Matthew Vos, a sociologist and good friend of mine, has developed a basic exercise to help freshmen college students think about their connections to others. On the first day of class, right after the new students have found their seats, he asks for a couple of volunteers—one female, the other male—to publicly introduce themselves. Seems simple. The catch is that their introductions must avoid making any reference to groups in which they hold membership. The first student typically begins by stating her name. Immediately Vos stops her, interjecting that her name, of all things, ties her to a family—one of the most important groups to which she belongs. He also remarks that her choice to speak in English represents close ties to a group, and her clunky narrative uses conceptual categories of Western thought, also a group product. Not so easy, is it? Though the student valiantly attempts to complete the task, it rarely amounts to much more than "I like pizza." Of course, here too, her professor points out that pizza is not universally loved, but is something that American college students experience and come to enjoy as a by-product of group membership. The second student, believing he can do better, suffers the same fate. About all he can offer are a handful of idiosyncratic preferences that his professor easily links to various group memberships and the people who structure his life, give it meaning, and sustain his identity.

But there's more to the exercise. After both students "crash and burn" at introducing themselves, Vos asks them to try again, this time referring to any groups they like. This changes things considerably. Now they can talk freely about their families, a soccer team they played on in high school, someone they're in love with, the way a mission trip changed their life, or anticipated good times in college with new roommates. The point? We are more a product of things outside us than things inside us, and we cannot talk about what we love without referring to other people. In fact, most of what we experience "inside" ourselves—things deeply personal and private, both

Great exercise!

pleasurable and painful—is inseparable from relationships with others. Even “personal” emotions like anger, sadness, or joy result from our connections to others and do not exist in some private, inner space untouched by the people around us. Worry, for example, often arises from fear of not measuring up to perceived expectations of others important to us. Our worry about grades and academic achievement, which may feel self-imposed, frequently links back to childhood experiences that led us to believe our acceptance by others depended on our effort and performance. Does something like anxiety exist in any important way apart from pressures generated in “the social”? Not really.

Humans are necessarily social creatures with histories.⁷ Trying to deny this is a rejection of what constitutes our humanity. “Culture” is not just something “out there”; we breathe it like air: it includes the artifacts we use (whether a shovel or an iPhone), the songs we sing, the language we employ, and the people we know. There is no escaping culture, nor should we wish to escape it. Should we reject sinful perversions of people and culture? Yes, absolutely. But let us be careful not to confuse *difference* with sin. Our particularity is not in the absence of context, but embedded in it.

Sometimes I hear well-meaning Christians say things like, “Your identity is in Christ, not in being an Asian American,” or some other group. This has an element of truth: union with Christ subverts all the categories (like family, nationality, or social class) we normally use to pigeonhole people: Saint Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

But calls to find one’s “identity in Christ” can sound shallow when someone who is part of a majority culture speaks to someone who isn’t. It is easy for any of us to unintentionally smuggle unexamined cultural assumptions into our understanding of identity. What may look to me like “politicizing the gospel” may in fact be no more than resistance to this kind of smuggling. Throughout history, Christians have often made the connections between the gospel and seeking changes in their homes, villages, or even societies. If we fail to appreciate the social dynamics of our identity, we will make this mistake and hurt one another. This happens when I *assume* my culture rather than relativizing it, such as when I confuse my subculture’s etiquette with binding biblical commands, asking others to conform to practices that may make me comfortable but that really are

with others. Even
our connections
intouched by the
ar of not measur-
Our worry about
posed, frequently
e our acceptance
es something like
generated in "the

.⁷ Trying to deny
ulture" is not just
s the artifacts we
the language we
lture, nor should
as of people and
se *difference* with
t embedded in it.
ce, "Your identity
other group. This
ie categories (like
geonhole people:
e is neither slave
: in Christ Jesus"

nd shallow when
neone who isn't.
xamined cultural
may look to me
han resistance to
have often made
s in their homes,
ocial dynamics of
ner. This happens
as when I confuse
ds, asking others
out that really are

not required for Christian faithfulness. We have examples of nineteenth-century missionaries to Japan believing sitting on raised-up chairs rather than on the floor was a sign of Christian growth, rather than merely one culture's preferences. It is always dangerous to baptize certain practices. Or, this challenge arises when I take a positive assessment of police or government for granted—because I have personally been treated well and fairly—and negatively judge those who raise concerns because they have witnessed police brutality or governmental bias. All of us speak and act from our social locations and history. No one escapes this challenge, but most of us who are part of majority culture find it much harder to recognize this social force.

While it is true that our identity is in Christ, that doesn't mean that our family, our culture, or other aspects of our particular experience are irrelevant. Our identity in Christ isn't something apart from our cultures and backgrounds but rather his transformation of them as he brings us to himself. Yes, we must reject sinful behaviors and impulses, but we must also recognize the parts that others play in shaping both who we are and our understanding of ourselves. Sometimes our cultural assumptions make it hard to tell the difference between sinful patterns and godly ones: for example, when does self-reliance move from a positive virtue to arrogant isolation? This is part of why a healthy church, family, and friendships are vital to healthy spirituality. I need others if I am to be the most faithful version of "me." We expose one another's blind spots and help one another imagine a more beautiful, flourishing life. The Christian insight is that "I" flourish not so much by exalting myself as by learning to love and sacrifice for others as well as learning to accept such love and sacrifice from others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Connecting the Self to Others

Addressing a small church of eighty people in Madrid, Spain, on October 21, 1928, a twenty-two-year-old German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a short sermon. On his mind were the struggles of the youth who were present; their wrestling with identity questions provided an opportunity for him to help the whole congregation think about a question that had particular force in modernity: "Who am I?" His text was Luke 17:33: "Whosoever shall seek to preserve his soul shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it."⁸

Challenges to Self-Understanding

Among the congregation were many teens who were not much younger than the preacher, so he appears to have shared an existential solidarity with them, believing that “only one question” really animated their lives.⁹ What is the one thing? Sex or gender? Maybe sports or fashion? No, he was looking for the deeper question that was the “center of all their thinking and action.” In their transition from children to young adults, a strange and disquieting change happens: “Their souls are divided.” What does he mean?

Bonhoeffer had a complicated relationship to the discipline of psychology in his day, but he was interested in the complexity of people’s self-understanding,¹⁰ approaching these questions from a sociological perspective.¹¹ As exemplified in his earliest theological work, *Communion of Saints* (*Sanctorum Communio*, 1923), he tended to view the individual in communal terms.¹²

Bonhoeffer addressed the psychological mysteries people face when they begin to “become the object of their own observation.”¹³ As they start to ask about the *I* (the “ego”), they start to recognize that they are a “separate self.”¹⁴ Rather than comforting, this can be painful, turbulent, revealing an internal “seething and surging and raging.” A chasm can develop between how others perceive the young person and how that person feels, and so the questions of the ego—of the self—can gain unsettling power. Teachers or parents may think I am confident and able, while internally I feel like a fraud and see all my blemishes. With the growing awareness of that chasm, one begins to see this internal world as different and often divided from the external world.

Living in an age of social media, we take for granted that people “brand” themselves to construct a public image—not just famous actors, but your high school classmates, your coworkers, or even celebrity pastors. As is well known, social media can produce an unhealthy chasm between external perception and internal realities. Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the “separate self” start to resonate with people who feel a growing divide between internal thoughts and external perceptions. Despite romantic ideals of self-discovery, the internal “self” is not normally calm and attractive but unsettling, accusatory, and wild. People bounce around in their heads, as Bonhoeffer testifies, unable to decide who they are: “That’s me? No, that’s not me. . . . It *is* me, for in me, too, things are seething and surging like that.”¹⁵ Out of that turbulent sea a person is occasionally thrust up to the top for a gulp of

air, and in those moments the questions come out as quickly as the oxygen goes in: "Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? What am I to do?" The transition from child to adult involves this turmoil, as does midlife crisis or end-of-life self-reflection: one can never escape questions about personal identity.

Bonhoeffer preached this sermon five years before Hitler came to power, so Nazism did not yet have a presence in his imagination. What frightened him here was not an external evil force, as would happen later, but an awareness of the "misery of human existence [that] seizes our heart for the first time and we ourselves seize up in our distress in our unredeemed state." From that position one main thing occupies our heart's cry, and that is "release from the demon I, for control over it, for redemption. How do I save my ego? How do I become free?"¹⁶ The sermons of this period exhibit a restless spirit akin to that in Augustine's fourth-century *Confessions*.¹⁷ When people of any age, but especially those between the ages of fifteen and thirty, find themselves struggling with these kinds of questions, we commonly provide them a few typical suggestions. Bonhoeffer is aware of these and mentions two of them, recognizing the shortcomings of each.

First, we tell people to heed the ancient Greek admonition: "Know thyself." While this historical inscription in the temple of Apollo at Delphi has been repeated through the ages by philosophers and teachers, a nagging problem is inescapable: *Who really ever knows oneself?* This takes us back to the fundamental challenge of human finitude—our limited abilities include a necessary humility about our chances at self-understanding. Might there be ways in which other people know us better than we know ourselves? While a spouse, parent, or friend could easily abuse this claim, those who live, work, and inhabit the world with us can sometimes see parts of us that we fail to appreciate or purposely ignore. We change over time, we surprise ourselves by our thoughts or actions, and we occasionally even lie to ourselves. Slow down and think about that for a second: How and why would we lie to *ourselves*? This points to a great mystery. According to Bonhoeffer's sober conclusion, "we are and remain unknown to ourselves—known only by God," which helps explain times of brooding and despair. No matter how excited you are about the Enneagram, admitting the genuine limits of self-understanding is necessary if we are ever going to take our creaturely finitude seriously.

Second, when self-knowledge has proven insufficient, we are sometimes pointed toward "self-control" or "self-formation." We need to try harder.

We just need greater willpower so that we can mold ourselves into what we want to be: this reminds one of Sartre's existential imperative. In Christian circles, as Bonhoeffer observes, this often sounds like a call to focus on the "soul," giving all one's attention to the internal world. Almost a century after Bonhoeffer preached this sermon, I do believe there is a strange parallel between a culture that tells everyone they can and should be whatever they want to be and Christians who understand the gospel in almost exclusively internal categories (e.g., understanding peace and grace only as feelings without any social or relational aspects). Both the church and the world—each in its own ways—thus reduce the self to psychological states of mind. If we are uncritical of the social trends around us, we easily accept an individualistic view of the self, with psychotherapy as the main tool for forming the self.¹⁸ Even the most spiritual sounding of these models tend to breed an "egotism in its purest state . . . and thus all the more dangerous."¹⁹ They reduce sin to feelings and motivations, downplay concern for and connection with the external world, and undermine the value and function of relationships.

Losing the Self to Gain Life

Scripture does not call us to the "moral polishing" of our own souls, but to something entirely different. Bonhoeffer challenges his anxious audience with a promise: let your passion be for *another*; submerge yourself in service and sacrifice for the beloved, and you will "in some incomprehensible way [know] that we have been created anew as another, new, better self."²⁰ You must be willing to lose your life to gain it. This new self is not discovered by fostering a pattern of isolation, but in a new connection to others that is fostered through sacrifice, service, and love.

Both in our own experience and in the biblical accounts, people who act as if they were isolated units or at the center of the world exhibit a distorted sense of self.²¹ Bonhoeffer, in contrast, claims that we can find ourselves by self-surrender, subordinating ourselves to others: "Being able to surrender oneself, to forget and lose oneself, being able to bow beneath the claim of one's neighbor in the spirit of passionate sacrifice—and being able to find oneself again here on the altar of the most extreme surrender, that is our blessing, that is God's grace."²² But if I give myself up for others, doesn't that mean "I" will cease to be me? Will I remain "unformed" and insignificant? Will my soul be lost rather than saved?

Luke 17:33 oddly claims that seeking to preserve your soul will actually mean you lose it. Why? There is a strangeness to the “redemption of the ego” that Scripture and Bonhoeffer speak about. Focusing on one’s soul—on oneself—means you lose yourself. It reminds me of the hedonic paradox: *if you focus on gaining your happiness, it will constantly elude you.* Only by *not* focusing on your own happiness can you experience the true depths of actual happiness. Similarly, the soul is lost and saved not by denying one’s particularity but by laying oneself before the living God, letting his will be more important than my will, thus submitting myself to his purposes and plans. To our surprise, when this happens, we discover true life.

Redemption of the self, as Bonhoeffer puts it, comes not through efforts of self-improvement nor ever greater explorations into self-knowledge, “but through beholding God’s singular goodness.”²³ And yet, this “redemption” always takes place “in the world,” not in some platonic sphere. Why? Because this world is where our neighbors are, and *we need our neighbors to even know ourselves in relation to God.* “You who give yourself completely to your neighbor are giving yourself to God; through your neighbor, you will be redeemed by God.”²⁴ While this will sound difficult to many, Bonhoeffer is pushing us to see the intrinsic link between the biblical commandments of loving God and loving neighbor. Remember, we are necessarily social creatures—that is how God created us.

We don’t have a complete manuscript of the sermon, but the final recorded words that we have are, “You have liberated yourself—no, God has bound you, bound . . .” One can imagine that, as a good Lutheran pastor, Bonhoeffer would complete this thought: liberated from the slavery to sin, one discovers that one is bound to God and his righteousness.²⁵ As the apostle Paul repeatedly claims, we move out of slavery to sin into being slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:16, 18–19, 20). Yet this is not slavery, but true freedom. Luther’s axiom captures this dynamic:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.²⁶

Jesus embodies this paradox. How we relate to God changes how we relate to others. This is freedom in the Creator and Redeemer who tells us who we are and who sets us free to live and love. The liberated self is always necessarily a *self-in-relation*.

What does all of this mean? Bonhoeffer knows that when we focus on ourselves, when we try to center our lives on our isolated egos, the result is not calm but chaotic, not clear but confused, not generous but selfish. Why? Because, as with Matt Vos's students who try to describe themselves apart from their relationships, any attempt to live as my own center shows that I need others to understand myself, and I need them even more to be a healthy and thriving human creature. This is how God made us.

Because we have our being in relation and not apart from it, knowing one's self rightly can only occur in the context of being known, of being in relationships, of being loved. The self alone—the isolated ego—is a contradiction in terms: pursuing that contradiction leads not to life-giving knowledge but to suffocating loneliness and unending self-doubt. Such a wrongheaded pursuit is fostered by the brokenness of the world outside us and the disordered world within us.

Augustine: The Problem of Disordered Loves

It is not our creaturely limits that make us sinful, but rather the absence or deformation of love. We arrive at this idea from Augustine's treatment of a fundamental question, "What is sin?" which he answers, "To act against Christ's commandment."²⁷ What is his commandment? The apostle John records it as "to love one another" (John 13:34; 15:12, 17). The commandment to love God and neighbor expresses the relational nature of human creatures as God made us (see, e.g., Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; 10:12–13; 30:6; Matt. 19:19; 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27; cf. Rom. 12:10; 13:9; Gal. 5:13; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11; 2 John 5). "Sin," Augustine says, "refers to the willful misdirection of the love that is fundamental to the life of the soul."²⁸ We were made to love (i.e., to be in positive relation to the other); sin is a form of rebellion because it rejects these good designs of our good Creator.²⁹

Sin is a problem; being human is not! *Love*, not escaping or overcoming one's creaturely limits, is the goal of life. Sin undermines our true humanity, our true selves, because it distorts all of our relationships by disordering our loves. We were not created intrinsically evil by design, but created intrinsically good—we were made by a good God for good purposes and pleasures. Sin, by deforming our loves and life, takes us away from our God and neighbor. God's law does not make us sinners, but simply declares what

is now sadly the case.³⁰ Looking to the law now as a kind of map or GPS system shows how far off track we have gone. Sin has turned royal daughters and sons of the Creator Lord into thieves and prisoners, beggars and bastards; rather than delighting in others, we treat them like instruments for our self-serving impulses. We no longer hear God's benediction, so our original security has been replaced by endless longings and unease. We try to create our own meaning and give our lives significance, but instead we live in a tiresome world of self-accusation and self-justification.

To go against self is the beginning of salvation.

Evagrius Ponticus

Augustine is helpful because he never forgets the centrality of love. But we no longer understand love as Augustine did. In the twenty-first century we have inherited the modern heresy that imagines love to be *self-generated*. The individual is everything. Love comes from within us, for it seems that we are isolated units of willing. Love is something that we create, that we maintain, that we let die. Love and its proper destination is—we tend to believe—up to us: no one can make us love another. And the idea of being commanded to love strikes us as downright offensive. Why? Because we imagine we are the originators of love, and so no external authority or person can or should require it of us. For example, the modern romantic view of marriage as created and maintained only by self-generated emotion, instead of by covenant and the community, produces a multitude of problems because our loves are so often unstable.

Conversely, according to Augustine and the classic orthodox tradition, love is not something creatures generate, but rather it is a divine reality we participate in. Creation flows out of the preexistent triune love of God; we love because we live in the flow of God's love. Sin so distorts our experience that we now imagine ourselves, rather than God, to be central. Having rejected God as our center and anchor point, we cannot help but see ourselves as the center of the world. Reduced to relying on our individual perceptions, we can only see what is around us and ourselves at the middle. Our interests follow our perceptions, so we also treat all our relationships in a self-centered way. Only by reckoning with God can we navigate the mysterious complexities of knowing ourselves and every other person as part of a community, as part of all of humanity.

Divine love alone is able to secure the one and the many, the whole and the part. Divine love holds us all together even when we fail to recognize it.³¹

One's failure to know the name or even the concept of gravity doesn't reduce its presence and power. Similarly, ignoring or denying the presence and power of divine love does not make it disappear. Yet, in rebellion against this holy Lover, we have distorted the world, and most especially ourselves. A right view of the self then always takes us into this web of relations with God, neighbor, and the rest of creation. But sin has left us in confusion, insecurity, and self-condemnation. Only God himself can restore us to ourselves and to our right relations; and only by resting secure in the divine benediction can a person courageously ask and answer the question: *Who am I?*

What Is Most True about Me?

Given that we are not merely finite human creatures but also sinful ones, the difficulties of self-understanding are exponentially multiplied. I conclude this chapter with two significant challenges that grow out of this situation: each can only be answered by both accepting our finitude and leaning on the promises of the God who is present and is not silent.

First, what do we do when the view that others have of us conflicts with the way we see ourselves? *Who am I? The person others say I am or who I say I am?* Second, what do we do with our internal conflicts, especially in our experience of a divided self that struggles between sinful actions and godly desires? *Who am I? Are my failures or my successes more revealing of who I am?* Though the two questions are different, each will find its answer only in God's presence and declaration.

Public Perception and Internal Insecurities

On November 30, 1943, Eberhard Bethge, who was serving in the military, wrote a letter to his imprisoned best friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They were now in very different contexts, but each "shared the loss of self-determination."³² Neither was where he wanted to be or doing what he wanted to do. Yet, when Bethge had a chance to visit Bonhoeffer, he was astonished to see not a distraught man but a cheerful one.³³ This image of Bonhoeffer as a noble martyr was just starting to grow, but is that really who the imprisoned man was?³⁴

In one of his later letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer addressed this conversation and admitted that he yearned for better times and that despite

the impression he sometimes gave in person or in letters, "it is horrible here" and he was struggling.³⁵ Physical deprivations and discomforts were things he could get used to in prison, but the psychological pressures were what really got to him. Hearing the cries and seeing the injustices made him feel like he was aging way too fast, filling him with a "nauseating burden." His deeper challenge had less to do with the wearisome environment and more to do with his unsettling internal world: "I often wonder who I really am: the one always cringing in disgust, going to pieces at these hideous experiences here, or the one who whips himself into shape, who on the outside (and even to himself) appears calm, cheerful, serene, superior, and lets himself be applauded for this charade—or is it real?" About fifteen years after his sermon in Spain, Bonhoeffer revealed his lingering questions about the psychological imperative to "know yourself": at any given moment he might be different. This is less about an internal conflict between sinful and righteous desires and more a question about his continuity of self—was he really this person or that one? In Bonhoeffer's case what others think of him tended to be positive, yet his internal struggles pointed toward more negative feelings. Conversely, one can also imagine a similar dynamic that moves in the opposite direction, like having a parent who only speaks negatively of you while you have reasons to believe you are not so bad as all that. Sadly, this kind of situation occurs in dysfunctional homes where children consistently hear they are "worth nothing" or "won't amount to anything." Whether one receives external praise or accusations, the common element is that we can experience a disconnect between what others say about us and what we believe about ourselves. So what should we believe? We need others, but basing our concept of ourselves completely on them produces as many problems as relying only on ourselves.

Many months later, while Bonhoeffer was reflecting from his prison cell in Tegel in the summer of 1944, less than one year before his execution, he revisited this theme. From the confines of his room he wrote a poem entitled "Who Am I?"³⁶ Structurally his poem is driven by repeating this question and providing different answers. The first set of answers is what others say of him.

Who am I? They say to me often,
I step out of my cell

calm and serene and strong,
like a lord from his castle.

Who am I? They say to me often,
I speak with my guards
freely and cordially and clearly,
as if I were giving orders.

Who am I? They say to me also,
I bear the days of misfortune
temperately, smiling, and proud,
like one for whom victory is customary.

And yet Bonhoeffer felt a disconnect between the perceptions of others and his own internal doubt and worry. So he continues:

Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I myself know of me?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for life-breath, as if one were choking me by the throat,
starving for colors, for flowers, for bird-songs,
thirsting for good words, for human companionship,
trembling with rage over capriciousness and the smallest slight,
plagued by waiting on great things,
helplessly worried about friends at endless distance,
too exhausted and empty to pray, to think, to work,
faint and ready to bid everything farewell?

What was true? Who was Bonhoeffer? Was he the composed, wise, and capable leader others encountered, or was he the exhausted, frightened, self-absorbed person that was constantly taunted with doubts, fears, and pettiness? Which "self" was the real one? He felt the weight of the unanswerable question:

Who am I? This one or that one?
Am I then this one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at the same time? To people a hypocrite
And to myself a contemptuous, sniveling weakling?
Or is what remains in me akin to the defeated army,
that yields in disarray to a victory already won?

The poem concludes:

Who am I? The solitary query mocks me.
Whoever I am, You know me. I am *Yours*, O God!

Bonhoeffer came to believe that “more important matters are at stake than self-knowledge.”³⁷ What matters most is what *God* thinks of us. Bonhoeffer’s trust in God relieved him from having to resolve conflicts between the way others perceived him and his self-perception. By saying to God, “You know me,” he was not simply including himself within God’s knowledge of everything: this is personal more than technical knowledge, because we *belong* to God. He claims us. That relationship with this God of heaven and earth means that some things are God’s task and not ours, and perfect knowledge of anything, including knowledge of ourselves, is his business and not ours. In this fellowship we can rely on God to bring to our attention whatever knowledge that we need for the task at hand. As a result of this confidence, we know ourselves more truly than endless self-examination could ever accomplish.

Sinner or Saint: Our Daily Inner Conflict

When we are talking to the person in front of us, whom are we dealing with? They may have a nicely shaven face rather than an unkempt beard, they may be rich rather than poor, and physically strong rather than weak, but *who are they*? And who should they be? Looks can be deceiving. We look at the financially successful investment banker or the Christmas-card family, and we assume everything is fine, until . . . until we scratch below the surface, until we discover the insecurities, the anger, the frustrations and fears. It is not just those with a messy appearance whom we misjudge, but also those who appear jovial and content. Counselors and pastors, schoolteachers and police officers can look at a crowd of faces and see what the uninitiated do not. The naive often interpret a sea of happy expressions and carefree people by surface appearances, but those who daily have to look behind the curtain know better.

Part of the difficult but penetrating insight of Christianity is that it holds tensions where we might prefer simpler answers. Christian anthropology—our conception of being human—puts us right in the middle of such tensions. For example, on the one hand, we are sinners!³⁸ This doesn’t mean

* merely that we transgress God's law from time to time, but that from the bottom up we are infected with a bias against God, against love, even against our own best interests. And yet . . . And yet, we also insist that humans are glorious creatures distinctly made in the very *image* of the invisible God. Humans are *like* God! We don't have to get into detailed debates about what that means to let the fundamental truth of it floor us. We are made in the image and likeness of God. We are glorious humans made by God.³⁹ And yet . . . And yet, we are people who, as the old Book of Common Prayer reminds us, "have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done."⁴⁰

Who are we? Glorious creatures! Who are we? Self-absorbed sinners! Who are we? Creatures who, as Søren Kierkegaard demonstrated, are living with a "sickness unto death."⁴¹ We have to affirm both. Some want to affirm "life" and our agency but ignore personal sin and guilt; others are so emphatic about the depth of human sin that they fail to remember humanity's dignity and true glory. Jesus himself reminds us of the danger of human sin even as he goes about the work of new creation.

The Creator has come among us as our Redeemer. God has made us "new" or "born again": we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:14–21)! Christ has reconciled us with God and with each other. This is true not merely of my psychology but also of my being and therefore my relationships. The incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord therefore provides not just forgiveness but a new being, a new creation. Because I am in Christ, this new being-in-relation means that I am also necessarily called to a ministry of reconciliation with others (2 Cor. 5:17–18).

• • •

Because of some relationships that God brought my way, I have had occasion to visit prisoners. Before I spent time with prisoners serving long sentences, I did not realize how nightmarish this inner conflict could be. Some prisoners in their cots at night are often taunted by self-accusations. They know what they have done (even if they do not admit it to others), and the damning arrows fly at their hearts—day after day, year after year. The devil is no fool, so he doesn't have to invent anything new, repeating instead our own thoughts about our lives to crush us, even if he exaggerates and distorts the facts.

A prisoner named Miguel,⁴² reflecting on suffering and related challenges, once said to me, "It is easy to make sense of lamenting to God when we are

talking about people who haven't really done anything. We can understand their grief, their complaints and confusion before God amid their suffering and aches. But what about those who have done things, terrible things. Can they lament? And how should we view ourselves? My mom and my children are kept at arm's length even by the church because of what I did. So how am I to think about myself now?" He had already been locked up for about fifteen years, the first ten in a very dangerous prison that was like hell. But even in a somewhat safer place, prison was still awful. He is someone's son and another's father; a military veteran and former community member; a gentle, soft-spoken man; a murderer. So, what is true about him? Who is he? Is he a man who wickedly killed another person? Yes. Is he a child of God who throws his entire hope on divine love and forgiveness? Yes. But what is *most* true about him? This isn't a debate about whether or not he should be in prison; it is a question about his identity. He now spends his time studying the Scriptures, in prayer, unevenly loving his neighbors within a rough context. Who is Miguel?

In the seventh chapter of his letter to some Roman Christians, the apostle Paul wrote of his own internal conflict and confusion. "For I [*egō*] do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). Although there are debates about how best to interpret this section of Paul's letter, there are good reasons to think that when Paul speaks of this inner conflict, he isn't just talking about people in general, but Christians in particular.⁴³ Although everyone experiences a similar psychological conflict, Christians have the benefit of scriptural insights into it and the Spirit's sanctifying presence. In addition, we experience the conflict within a distinctive eschatological tension, living between the "now" and "not yet." We can have noble and right desires that we fail to act on, or sometimes we act in ways that go against our deeper desires. In contrast with Socrates, who stated that people do bad things only because they are ignorant of what is truly good, Paul said that even when we know better, we often act in ways that are hurtful, discordant, and destructive. Such behaviors affect our relationships with God, neighbors, and even the earth, and they exhibit our internal conflict. As New Testament scholar Susan Eastman writes of this Pauline dynamic: "This self watches its own actions with horror and ascribes them to sin, with an 'I, yet not I' agency."⁴⁴ To understand this conflict we need to think less in terms of isolated individualism and more in terms of "self-in-relationship, corporately constituted

yet still a distinct self.”⁴⁵ In Christ we have our being in a new relationship to God and neighbor, so our sin creates even greater disturbance than for those outside of faith.

Despite having received the gift of the Spirit, who secures us in God’s promises (Eph. 1:13–14), believers still wrestle with what the Puritans used to call “indwelling sin.”⁴⁶ Paul often discusses such inner conflicts, as in Romans 7:15.⁴⁷ While this can get a little complicated, it is important to follow Paul’s logic. Here he points to a “distinction between the true self—‘I’—and the sin-dominated flesh.”⁴⁸ Despite the tendency to think Paul is pitting a “good” I against a “bad” I, he doesn’t actually do that, since he “nowhere ascribes corrupt desires to the ‘I.’”⁴⁹

As a gift of the new covenant, the Spirit makes real to (and in) believers “the truth as it is in Jesus.” . . . What this means is that our selves are defined by and, indeed, *in* another. This is not simply formal but real, because of the Spirit’s presence.

Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament*

For Saint Paul, sinful actions arise not from his true “I” but instead from “sin,” this corrupt “flesh” that distorts the good creation. Sin is a disordering of our passions, our minds, and our actions, and therefore a disordering of our being itself. It is parasitic, as in Augustine’s view that evil has no

being of its own but only as a negation or corruption of the good. The believer is a new creature, liberated from the domination of sin, death, and the devil. Our new being is a being-in-communion with God, each other, the created world, and ourselves. Sin consists in the attempted negation of our own being and existence. It is no wonder that Christians experience sin as being torn apart, as the destruction of self and of communion.

Because we experience that disruption of life in cycles of moving into and then out of sin into repentance, it is sometimes compared to the pilgrim life of tent dwellers who long for a more stable home (2 Cor. 5:1–10). We are new, but we do not yet experience the fullness of our (re)new(ed) life. Why? Not because we are finite creatures, but because this side of glory all of our relations remain distorted by sin and disordered loves. So even now we still long for what is to come.

Because our identity is found in Christ, the problem with our sin is less that we have broken a rule and more that we are not acting according to who we are. We properly respond to sin not by hating ourselves but by turning to Christ and trusting him, leaning on his Spirit to resist sin and

cultivate the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and truth.⁵⁰

Eastman furnishes a parable for understanding the relation of identity to daily actions, a parable we can apply to the eschatological tension of the now and not yet. Employing what therapists have learned in caring for those dealing with anorexia/bulimia, she sees a strong parallel to what we find in Paul. Earlier treatments used to apply labels (e.g., "anorexic") to people, thus blurring distinctions between a hurtful behavior and a person's fundamental identity. When this happens, one can easily suppose that the person is the problem: this way of using language feeds shame and judgment, because the patients cannot escape themselves! They can seek to shed a behavior or resist an impulse, but they can't stop *being* who they are. If I *am* a bulimic, I have lost my agency and must act according to this identity: the best I can hope for is learning to be a better bulimic. Therapists have more recently applied narrative language to distinguish the person from these behaviors, which are a "hostile and alien enemy of the person, which lodges within and uses its victim's own desire to do the right thing to deceive and literally kill her."⁵¹

Distinguishing the person from the addictive behavior helps the patient identify, fight, and resist the self-harming actions: similarly, those tempting voices are sin, not the true and good ego God created. By God's grace, I am most free when I resist sin and instead love what, and as, God loves. The goal of these distinctions between identity and behavior, whether in therapy or in preaching, is not to undermine human agency but to encourage freedom and action. We call Christians to act according to who we are (i.e., saint), and not according to these destructive sinful desires (sinner). You are free from shame, for you are a saint. Live out of that freedom.

Furthermore, Paul calls us to fight sin not merely as an internal battle but as part of the living community, the body of Christ. The *I* set free from sin is one of a multitude of *I*'s connected to each other in Christ. Therefore, just as those fighting anorexia are best served through supportive relationships, each Christian is most free, most true, and most empowered to fight sin when living in that fellowship, when surrounded and strengthened by God's people.

Conclusion

Susan Eastman convincingly argues that Paul writes of Christian experience as a "double participation." Two things are true for believers living in this

world: (1) Christ is victorious and we are secure in his finished work; and (2) since we still live vulnerably "in the flesh" this side of the eschaton, we do not escape ongoing challenges from within and from without.⁵²

Although sin has disrupted all our relationships, God's in-breaking into time and space has accomplished what we could not do ourselves: he has brought grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Given the conflicting narratives around and within us, God alone can tell us what is most true about us. Miguel committed murder, but that is not what is most true about him. Actually, he is a saint, loved by God, forgiven, and now set free to love his (imprisoned) neighbors and called to be an ambassador of reconciliation. This is why Paul declares, "What we proclaim is *not ourselves*, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with *ourselves as your servants* for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5; emphasis added).

We turn away from sin because it is unfaithfulness to God and it destroys fellowship with him, his people, and even ourselves.⁵³ As a Christian, I am a holy one (saint) whom God has claimed for himself, to rest in his grace and to be an ambassador of his reconciliation. This is the meaning and purpose of life he has given his people. Each Christian's calling will look different in the expression of this purpose, just as different parts of the body express a common purpose (supporting the life of the body) in different ways. My belly button does not merely remind me of Mom and Dad, but of my Creator and Redeemer, from whom I have life, meaning, and purpose.

So who am I? I am a Christian. I am a saint. I am a child of God whom he has called to good and meaningful work. As a finite creature, I am from a particular place and people; I don't ignore my ethnicity, native language, socioeconomic setting, or the relationships that surround me. As God's child, I am called not to deny my context or past but to see all of these relationships changed in and through God's holy love. Here my identity is shaped and reshaped. Secure in Christ and aware of my dependence on others, I know that the Spirit works in me against the distorting effects of sin that harm the relationships God created us for. With gratitude I have been set free to engage in acts of love and reconciliation that now foster mutual life-giving communion. In this way, my identity can be properly found in Christ, in the community, and in relationship to God's whole creation. This, as we will now see, is the path of humility, which is the path of being a truly human creature.