

Identity, world and Word

By **Walt Mueller**

I use the fact that I'm a "youth culture watcher" as an excuse to regularly play a little game that might sound a bit strange—at first. I call it "assuming identity." Here's how it works: First, I pretend I'm someone I'm not. The identity of that generic someone is usually a child or teen, say a 14-year-old girl, a 17-year-old boy or a male fifth grader. For some strange reason the younger the someone, the better I do! I never give my alter-identity a name, but I do try to imagine what it's like to live in their skin developmentally. In other words, I try to picture what a kid that age feels, thinks and desires. Then, after imaginatively assuming that identity, I take a short "walk" through a popular cultural expression (music, video, film, book, TV show, place, etc.), imagining how that particular thing will effect my young "me," particularly at the level of identity formation. In other words, I try to figure out how it will shape me, my values, my attitudes, my behaviors and my understanding of myself.

Recently, I asked a room full of youth workers to play along with me. I told half of the room to assume the identity of a 14-year-old boy. The other half became 12-year-old girls. After jokingly telling them to "keep your hands off each other," I lowered the lights and played a music video by 19-year-old pop star Rihanna—a teenager herself. And so we watched and listened as this talented young singer performed her catchy hit song from early last year, "Shut Up and Drive."

When the lights went on I asked the "teens" in the room what the song taught them about "themselves." The girls learned how important it is to have a slim and trim body, and to wear clothing that shows that body off. They learned that being a "girl gone wild" isn't a bad thing, but maybe the normal thing. They learned that they had power over guys and that they could boss the guys around, telling them what to do—particularly when it comes to relating to each other sexually. Not only that, but they learned that relating to each other is *all* about sexuality. The boys learned that their identity lies in their sexuality, that girls are to be viewed as objects no different than a car, and that they hold the keys to those "cars" in their hands. Finally, one "girl" said, "I want to be Rihanna. She's got it *all*!"

Without hesitation, I believe that the defining and single-most important issue we must address with kids is *identity formation*. The reason? It's the single-most important issue in a teenager's life. And the place they land now in terms of their own understanding of themselves will in many ways determine who they are for the rest of their lives. In the end, every teenager chooses to find their identity in something. And it's not just teenagers—it's the most important issue for all of us.

As I've worked with and raised teenagers, I've realized that this struggle to find one's self is normal, and it plays a role in determining who teenagers become as adults. Some developmental experts have labeled this process "the teenage identity crisis." You and I went through it. Remember? Most likely, you looked to certain identity models during your own teenage years. TV or music stars, sports icons, or people you knew. Your own sense about your changing self and lack of self-acceptance may have caused you to emulate your heroes. Teenagers still dress, walk, talk, think and act based on what they see in those they look up to. There was a time in your life you tried on some different "yous" for size and feel.

In one way, this adolescent search for identity isn't anything new. I grew up in the 1960s. I remember people stereotyping confused teenagers as being on a quest to "find themselves." Back then, the stereotype had the puzzled adolescent hopping into an old VW bus and heading west to California on the quest to discover their identity. But the times have changed. Today, "California" comes to students 24/7 as the digital and media revolution has created a world where identity-shaping institutions and their messages live everywhere all the time.

In the quest to discover and adopt an identity, the teens you know and love are looking for answers to questions such as: Am I worthwhile? What makes me worthwhile? How am I unique from others? Is that uniqueness good or bad? What makes me special? And most importantly, who am I? In a perfect world, all of our teenagers would accept proper guidance and be drawn to Godly identity-shaping models. They would understand themselves and find their identity in who they are as unique individuals created in the image of God for a relationship with Him. But we don't live in a perfect world. Life in a fallen world presents kids with two options: either finding one's identity in Christ, or choosing to find that identity in something else. Our kids embrace idolatry when they base their value, worth and identity on someone or something other than God. That's why we should always be playing "assuming identity." We want to know who's sending identity messages, what those messages are and how kids are embracing those messages. To undo the wrong with the right, we must first know and understand the wrong that's being embraced so we can challenge that wrong with the right.

Our imperfect world is marked by the waning influence of institutions (family and church) that traditionally helped teenagers understand and assume that their identity should be found *in* Christ. And as brokenness from our Creator continues to undo that perfect world and those voices of truth grow dim, the door has been opened for other social factors and cultural institutions to step in and fill the void, sending powerful identity-shaping lessons with increased volume that teach our kids who they should be and how they should live. Eventually, the blind start leading the blind, as teenaged influencers like Rihanna (and she's not alone by any stretch of the imagination), show their peers the way through the teenage years, telling them "This is where to find your identity," and leaving them saying "That's who I want to be."

So where are kids landing in their search for identity? And what effect is that having on their lives? In his recent book, *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller offers us answers that can shape the identity-things we talk about with our kids. First, he defines "sin" in

terms that speak volumes to the adolescent search for identity: "Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God." Then, he goes on to share what he's learned by playing his own version of "assuming identity" as a culture watcher. While there are an infinite variety of "identity-bases," Keller's categories sparked some thoughts and revisions of my own about the identity-bases that are living and thriving in today's youth culture:

- **Sexual partners and romantic others.** With family breakdown on the rise, more and more of our students are seeking intimacy and identity in significant others or temporary sexual encounters. When our kids center their identities on their love interests or sexual partners rather than on God, they will become emotionally dependent, jealous and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to them. And, they will reduce the identity of others to pure objects.
- **Academic or athletic achievement.** Many of our students look to find their value and worth in their accomplishments in the classroom or on the field. When this happens, they become driven, boring, and shallow. They can lose family and friends, unless of course their parents and friends are finding their own identity through their teenager's successes as well. If something goes bad and it all falls apart—either temporarily or forever—they are a failure. Inevitably, the last whistle will blow and it all will come to an end. Or, somebody else's grades eclipse their own. What then? Depression can set in. Might this offer a clue to why so many of our kids are depressed?
- **Money and possessions.** Our kids are being hammered by marketing messages that leave them believing that "Whoever dies with the most toys wins" and "You are what you have." Happiness is equated with having. But finding one's identity in stuff leads to being eaten up by worry and jealousy. In order to maintain and improve their lifestyle they may choose to do unethical things. Eventually, life blows up. Like the rich young ruler, they walk away from Jesus very, very rich in the things of this world, but unable to enjoy them because they are very, very sad.
- **Pleasure, gratification and comfort.** Our kids are growing up in a world where pain is to be avoided at all costs, while pleasure is something to be pursued. Kids want to "feel good." They take pills, abuse drugs, engage in extreme sports, binge drink and get involved in all kinds of sexual behaviors to temporarily numb the pain and turn up the volume on the pleasure. The sad result, Keller says, is that "you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the 'escape-strategies' by which you avoid the hardness of life."
- **Relationships and approval.** There's a scene in *Mean Girls* where the dastardly trio known as "The Plastics" stand in front of a single mirror, jockeying for position as each girl verbally criticizes her own flaws. What each one hopes is that the other two will argue away their self-criticism by denying the flaws even exist. Kids who find their identity in relationships and approval are always getting hurt by criticism and constantly losing friends. They fear confrontation—both giving and getting—and they wind up becoming useless friends.
- **Noble causes.** The emerging generation of students wants to make a difference in the world. We know that more and more are getting involved in social causes, most of those causes being noble in character. But when one's identity is found in the cause *and not* in doing good as a servant of God committed to the cause of Christ, you begin to compartmentalize people and the world into "good" and "bad." You demonize those who don't share your commitments. In the end, you wind up being controlled by your enemies, and without them, your purpose fades.
- **Religion and morality.** Today's teens are no more or less spiritual than previous generations. All humans since the beginning of time have been equally spiritual. The difference with today's kids is that their search is more *conscious* and *overt*. They are self-aware of their spirituality and embracing a variety of spiritual systems and beliefs. If this is where they find their identity, they will tend to be proud, self-righteous and cruel when they are living up to their own moral standards. And when they don't, they experience devastating guilt.

If our calling is ultimately about pointing kids to Christ and praying that He would embrace them so hard that they would find their identity solely in their embrace of Him, then what can we do to help our kids find their way through youth culture's current muddled and confusing identity mess? Here are some suggestions to get you started.

First, continually look in the mirror to check on yourself, asking this question: "Where am I finding my identity?" Since identity is a constant struggle for us all, we must recognize that along with all the other identity bases that knock on the door of our ultimate allegiance, parenting and youth ministry throw in a few extra. Do we find our identity in our kids' achievements? Do we find our identity in the size of our youth group? Our ability to make kids laugh or sing? Our perceived ability to identify with and relate to kids? The fact that there's a group of kids who like, adore and follow us around? That we have power over a group of people who pay attention when we speak? Keller reminds us that "every person must find some way to 'justify their existence,' and to stave off the universal fear that they're a 'bum.'" Hmmm. How many of us got into youth ministry in the first place in an effort to somehow find acceptance and significance. Ultimately, our identity can and must be found in Christ and Christ alone. We must be sure that with Augustine we are able to say, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee!"

Second, continually check in on the identity-shaping world. Watching culture is not a once-and-done past-tense activity. For the Christian, culture watching is an active and ongoing responsibility. Because culture is constantly shifting and changing, the responsibility lies on us to stay on top of the nuances of our kids' youth culture, particularly the messengers and messages that are shaping their identity. But it's not just something we do. It's something we do with a *purpose*. Theologian John Stott calls this "dual listening." He says that we "stand between the Word and the world with consequent obligation to listen to both. We listen to the Word in order to discover even more of the riches of Christ. And we listen to the world in order to discover which of Christ's riches are needed most and how to present them in their best light." When it comes to the task of shaping identity—both our own and our kids'—dual listening is a necessity. We must know their world in order to bring the light of the Word to bear on it.

Third, confront the lies. Several times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus issues "You have heard it said ... but I tell you" statements. Each and every time, Jesus is issuing a corrective to conventional, widely held, cultural wisdom that his hearers had not only heard, but had allowed to become a part of their very lives. Jesus confronts and undoes the cultural "you have heard's" with His Word-centered "I tell you's." As followers of Christ and ministers of His Kingdom message, we need to follow suit. As already stated, we must know the identity lies of our culture. Then, we must shed the light of God's life-changing and identity-giving truth on those lies. A hallmark of our nurture of our children is continually assuming the same "you have heard it said ... but Jesus tells you" posture on identity matters.

Finally, nothing speaks louder than embodied truth. Kids are sharp, very sharp. It doesn't take long for them to pick up on what it is that's got a strangle-hold on your identity. If you have embraced the Christ who has embraced you, then *that* mutual life-giving strangle-hold will serve as a compelling embodiment that turns conventional cultural wisdom on where to find one's identity upside-down! The *who* you are, sends strong messages on the *who* they've been made to be.

History tells us that the famous monk Bernard of Clairvaux hadn't always found his identity in Christ. He was born into the luxury-filled life of nobility. Eventually he learned that his identity could only be found in Christ. Out of that experience of living on the foundation of a new identity base, Bernard would pen these words to his now-classic hymn: "Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts! Thou fount of life! Thou light of men! From the best bliss that earth imparts, We turn unfilled to Thee again." That, and only that, is the place where our children and teens will truly find themselves.

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