

WEEK 1



IDENTITY

i·den·ti·ty – noun

1. *the condition of being oneself and not another.*
2. *the condition or character as to who a person is.*
3. *a point of sameness or likeness.*



Theme: *Identity* - The personal identity we have as followers of Jesus, and the group identity we have by being part of a Christian community. What makes us who we are and what makes us different from the people and culture around us?

Bible Passages: OT - Genesis 17:1-16 NT - Acts 9:1-16

Commentary: A comprehensive resource to help leaders understand the context behind the passage. Find it at the back of the cards.

The Story: A quick introduction to the week's bible passages and theme, which aims to engage people in the big picture of God's story, and the challenge of living faith in light of that.

For the Media Hounds: "Ask an Iraqi a Question" from the Summit DVD.

For the Scholars: Discussion questions focusing on exploring this weeks bible passages.

For the Dreamers: Discussions questions focusing on mulling over this weeks theme.

For the Realists: Possibilities for on topic testimonials, sharing & storytelling

For the Activists: Activities & adventures beyond the couch.



Genesis 17:1-16 The Covenant of Circumcision

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”



Acts 9:1 - 16 Saul's Conversion

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

THE STORY

It's amazing to think that of all the ways that

God could have started to unveil his Glory to the world - using a voice from the sky, or a divine fax machine, or a choir of Holy singing midgets - that he choose instead to form a community. A community that started in Genesis with the Covenant between Abraham and God, and then morphed into the Church in the New Testament, and craziest of all, now it's us. For whatever reason, God has chosen to work through a bunch of imperfect and impatient yobo's like us. It's now our turn to take the baton off Abraham and Paul, and model to the world how God wants everyone to live.

So when we get together as Christians to eat and study and laugh and pray - we're actually doing much more than just those things on there own. We're actually attempting to live out a new community, and a new way of being. So in one sense we're sort of like resident aliens in a foreign country, because we just never

quite fit in (a bit like the Iraqi guy on the DVD). People are intrigued by why we do what we do, and why we believe what we believe. And while the world might reward those who are self centered, and greedy, and judgmental, and discouraging, together as a community we live according to what God thinks is good - to be caring and generous, accepting and encouraging. This is what makes us who we are. It's part of our God shaped DNA. Together we have an identity that is stronger than any clothing brand or social niche or musical taste or career choice. And even though we often miss the mark - it's precisely because we keep on trying to live God's values better as a community that makes us so different.

So, in light of all of that, just how different to the status quo do we actually look?

FOR THE SCHOLARS - OLD TESTAMENT

Group discussion questions for Genesis 17:1-16

1. Abram was told to walk before God and be blameless. What does this mean? How do we try to be “blameless” in our own lives? Is it even possible?

NOTE: Abram was called not simply to know God was there, but that he should be in an actual relationship with Him.

2. What was Abrams initial response to God and why?

NOTE: For the record other examples of people's responses to God... Daniel was completely overcome by the might of God (Dan 10.7-9), Moses lay prostrate to pray and repent for the people (Deut 9.18-19), John was in awe and fear of Christ (Rev 1.17), Woman who anointed Jesus' feet in love and worship (Luke 7.38).

3. Why do you think God bothers changing his name from Abram to Abraham? What is the significance of the promise God makes to Abraham?

4. What is the responsibility of Abraham in this covenant? Circumcision would have been a painful part of the process both physically and in humility. What else is painful about our relationship with God?

5. God makes clear that any uncircumcised male must be cut off from the people. Why did he do that? Do we struggle to acknowledge God as judge, even when it's harsh?

NOTE: The implication of being cut off is that the person will wither and die, like a branch does when it's cut from a tree.

6. Sarah was 90 and Abraham 99 - far beyond the age of having children - and yet God still promised them a son (Isaac). Later on even Abraham and Sarah laugh at the idea because it seems so ridiculous! What would be our reaction to something like that happening today, or any miracle or sign?

FOR THE SCHOLARS - NEW TESTAMENT

Group discussion questions for Acts 9:1-16

1. “Breathing out murderous threats” is a pretty vivid and interesting image of Paul’s mindset and actions (v1). What murderous threats is Paul breathing?

2. If you heard a voice in the sky calling you what would be your first response?
Note: For another example see 1 Sam 3.1-10.

3. Literally speaking the name Saul means ‘Asks of God’, while the name Paul means ‘Little’. In what ways is Saul made little or humbled to God in this reading? How does God humble us today?

NOTE: Proverbs 16.18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Haughty means to be “arrogantly superior and disdainful.”

4. Ananias was scared that going to Saul would end up harming the church (v13). Would we react the same way? When do we let fear overcome our own call to obey God and live according to His ways?

NOTE: We’re called to follow God, but not be stupid with ourselves. We don’t seek danger, but we do seek a God which can bring danger.

5. The last few sentences are scary words, ones that Paul came to understand all too well (v14-16). How comfortable are we with the reality that following God sometimes leads to suffering? Would we follow God as closely if we had such promises of suffering spoken about us?

NOTE: In the book The Heavenly Man Brother Yun talks of the suffering he underwent for the faithful in China - imprisonment, beatings and weeks of starvation are some of the trials he faced, and all the way through he prayed and proclaimed Christ even more. At times he almost begged God for death, but God had other plans.

6. After this story Ananias went to Saul, laid hands on him and prayed for him. After all Paul had done to Christians, this massive act of healing and acceptance into the fellowship of the church must have been mind blowing. The man who's goal was to imprison Christians was now forgiven and accepted as a brother into faith. What enables us to feel accepted into the church? How should we accept others?

FOR THE DREAMERS

Group discussion questions for the theme of “Identity”

1. When God entered into a Covenant with Abraham in Genesis, He was calling Abraham to begin a new people that would reflect the values of God on Earth, and would be a light to all the surrounding nations. Being in Christian community means we try to live and model something different than the outside world - something that reflects the new Kingdom of God. What do you think should be the main marks of Christian community at it's best? How is your group doing at living up to these - do you feel you're not different enough, or too different?
2. God gave both Abraham and Paul new names as a reflection of their new roles and service in God's kingdom, implying that our identity in God's plan is important for us, and that words and language are important to God. Do you think the language we use and the way we talk about people in our church communities matter? Do you think names, either of individuals or of our communities matters in our place before God and as we establish our work in the world? What does the name/title 'Christian' mean to you (first used in Acts 11.26)
2. We live in a society where a person's image, identity and culture are hugely important as a way to help them find their place in the world. What things about our Christian faith do you think we could draw on more or be more proud of as a way of shaping our own identities to be more like Jesus?

3. What are some of the reasons that you think people have become so concerned with self-image and identity? What are some of the dangers of investing too much into what others think of you, instead of what God thinks of you? What are things you can do to keep your own identity focused on God rather than on your own image or other people's opinion of you?

5. It's one thing to have an identity as an individual person - but it's another thing completely to have a shared identity as a group of people. Do you feel you have a shared identity with your church community? Is there anything about your cluster group that makes you feel proud to be part of it? What would have to change for your group to be better at embodying God's Kingdom?

6. On one hand being a Christian means you'll be different than those around you a lot of the time but, as Jesus showed us, it also means making an effort to share our lives with those same people as well. What things do you think Christians should be different on, and what things should Christians embrace as a way of relating to others?

FOR THE REALISTS

Ask someone in your group to share for a few minutes about how their

faith makes them stick out or be notably different compared to their non-Christian friends. Ask them how they deal with the temptation to just conform rather than live by God's values? How do they work out what things to take a stand on? How do they deal with any flack they've received or insecurity they feel about being a Christian around non-Christians?

NOTE: remember to ask them at least a few days before hand so they get a chance to work out what they're going to say.

FOR THE ACTIVISTS

Marketers are famous for playing on our sense of personal identity to get

us to buy products. Print off a series of famous brand logos, hold them up one at a time, and get people in groups to write down what each brand implies about a person who owns or uses them. Some will have good impressions, some not so good. Possible examples: Apple, Mastercard, The Rock FM, BP, Huffer, Nestle. Do our corporate marketing and capitalism ever be based on Christian identity? What do names and logos imply in our world today? How can Christianity subvert or challenge the things we understand from corporate branding?

After that try giving some core Christian values or personalities the same treatment, and see what people come up with about our identity as God's people. Possible examples: Forgiveness, Love, Mother Teresa, Brian Tamaki.

