

**Identity in Christ: A theological  
anthropological study**

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this study project with the title, "*Identity in Christ: A theological anthropological study*", is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it to any other university in order to obtain a degree.

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X

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Nonhlanhla Mazibuko  
Miss

N Mazibuko

Date: 02/03/2023

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## ABSTRACT

Identity has been studied extensively throughout multiple disciplines over the past few decades. This study seeks to understand what it means to have an identity in Christ. Identity forms a large role in how human beings narrate their story, not only about themselves but also about God. Human identity ought to be understood in light of divine identity. In this study the connection between the *imago Dei* and humanity's identity is explored. In addition to theological sources, this study also engages with the findings of psychologists and sociologists in understanding identity. The study seeks to establish what identity and identity formation is and examine how can we understand the *imago Dei* and theological anthropology in relation to identity. In particular, it seeks to set out what it means to have an identity in Christ.

**Keywords:** Identity; *imago Dei*; theological anthropology; narrative theology

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The understanding of the *imago Dei* is important for every Christian. In the creation of humankind, God purposefully created humanity in His own image, a notion that refers to the very identity of humanity. The fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, however, led to a break in this image, or at least the understanding of how the image ought to manifest itself. Since salvation comes through Christ, and our identity is to be found in Christ, the identity of Christ Himself needs to be understood.

Identity has been studied extensively throughout multiple disciplines over the past few decades. It is best understood as a psychological construct that is influenced by multiple facets of life. Identity is understood to be a two-fold construct; it is both personal and social (Fearon, 1999:2). Social identity refers to the collective identity of a specific group, which involves the knowledge that one holds about a specific group and their relation to this group as a member (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012:74). This means that one who identifies as Christian does so in light of their relation and understanding of the religious group and their affiliation to the group. Social identity theorists often focus on understanding the dynamics between in-group identity, in other words, the things which bond affiliated members to each other; as well as out-group identity, that which distinguishes someone from another group to the in-group members (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012:74). Social identity includes everything that one thinks about a specific group and their position within the group. Religious affiliations are often viewed within one's social identity. This is because religious bodies exist within communities and essentially form communities of their own, which follow and ascribe to the in-group norms according to the religious affiliation. This part of one's identity only forms half an understanding of the concept of identity at large. Volf also notes that religion often operates as a guardian of group identity and one way to define 'us' and 'them' (2019:16),

Personal identity is the second facet of identity. Personal identity refers to the self, it is not always synonymous with the term, but can often times be used interchangeably, particularly in the field of sociology (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012:70). Personal identity is a distinguishing characteristic that makes one individual different from the next (Fearon, 1999:2). It is the understanding that all humans are self, and no two selves are the same. Everyone is unique, and personal identity refers to the attributes and characteristics one associates with their understanding of themselves. Frei refers to identity as the specific uniqueness of a person (2013:52), self-awareness (2013:53), and moral responsibility (2013:54).

Understanding identity as two-fold benefits one to have a broader understanding of identity and its impact and influence on our lives. It has been understood that one's identity can influence their decision-making capacities and the decision they make on a daily basis (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012:70). Thus, identity is rightly understood as one of the most basic and fundamental aspect of being (Hamilton, 1998:4). Being is understood both socially and personally. Identity can be understood as the very essence of being as understood by the individual and those around them. The intricate study of identity yields that there are multiple ways in which identity manifests itself in everyday life. Identity, deeply rooted in the self, can refer to a number of categories, such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, Christianity, etc.; all of these categories describe who the self identifies itself to be, and how others might identify the individual to be. Understanding one's identity is a pinnacle part of human existence, which makes it an essential component of theological anthropology.

The question of identity is an existential question and often manifests itself as "who am I?" or "what am I here for?". Erikson's theory proposes that identity formation takes place during one's adolescent stage, which ranges in the demarcation of eleven to twenty-one years of age (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). This is a stage where one becomes cognitively aware of themselves and begins to consider their personal values, goals, and morals. These are usually influenced by social groups, peer-groups, family, etc. One goes through a series of experimentations to determine who they are and what that means for them (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). Thus, forming an identity is

fundamental to the well-being, particularly the mental well-being, of any individual. In one's understanding of God and humanity, it thus becomes fundamental to understand how identity relates to one's relationship with God.

Those raised in Christian households, where Christian ideals and values were upheld, can be said to have had the influence of Christianity on their identity formation. Part of forming an identity includes deciding what norms and values a specific individual will hold. With a Christian influence, one can conclude that an individual is likely to hold onto normative Christian values, since both the social and personal identity of this particular individual would be heavily influenced by Christianity. Not everyone has the privilege of being raised within a Christian household, thus having Christianity as a primary influence during their years of identity formation. Often times, people become believers after they have already undergone the identity formation stage of development. Therefore, they already have pre-existing identities that define the self, outside of the Christian faith.

This study seeks to understand what it means to have an identity in Christ. Identity forms a large role in how humans narrate their story, not only about themselves, but also about God. Thus, it is fundamentally important that one understands what is meant by establishing an identity in Christ, and how it manifests itself in the everyday Christian experience. It is equally as important to understand the process of identity formation, when it occurs in one's human existence and therefore investigate what it means to establish an entirely new identity in Christ. This will help to understand whether Christianity as an identity marker is merely an added construct of one's identity or whether it has a deeper construct. It is important to investigate the nature of this new assumed identity. The conversion to Christianity assumes the taking on of a new religious identity, however, it is important to understand the implications of taking on a new identity beyond the years allocated for identity formation. The issue of identity formation and identity crisis if the stage is not complete, render the necessity to investigate the implications of beginning the process of identity formation from scratch, after one has already established a solid sense of self.

Forming a new identity in Christ is a major theme throughout the New Testament. When speaking to Nicodemus concerning the requirements to inherit the kingdom of God, Jesus reveals in John 3:3 that one needs to be born again. This idea, introduced by Jesus, is that one needs to assume a new spiritual identity in order to inherit the kingdom of God. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:22-24:

that, in reference to your former way of life, you are to rid yourselves of the old [a]self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you are to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

This attests to the notion of being born again, and assuming an identity in Christ. The idea of forming an identity in Christ is not an easy task, however, as identity in and of itself is a complex concept. Humans have a desire to belong. This desire manifests itself from birth, throughout their childhood, and their journey through life. In order to understand what it means to have an identity in Christ, it is important to understand the very basis of identity. If one does not, they run the risk of missing the mark entirely.

In examining an identity in Christ, it is also Christ's identity that is important, which is discussed at length by Frei, who notes that "the description of Jesus' identity must precede talk about his presence" (2013:51). Humans narrate their encounters with God in different forms. It is through these narratives that many find their own pathways to God. Narrative theology emphasises the importance of individual narratives in understanding the narrative of redemption. Narrative is instrumental in understanding human identity and what happens to the individual in the process of having an identity in Christ through the process of redemption (Klaasen, 2017:464). These narratives reveal individual and collective identities within different Christian communities.

Human identity ought to be understood in light of divine identity. In Scripture God reveals Himself as the utterly other, and purest form of being (Wiley, 2018). In order for Christians to develop an identity in Christ there needs to be an understanding of who Christ is, as He is revealed in Scripture. Theologians have studied the connection

between the *imago Dei* and humanity's identity in creation (Wiley, 2018). This connection is concluded to be the very essence of human identity in Christ.

A study of the understanding and manifestation of the *imago Dei* by every Christian is important. In the creation of humankind, God was purposeful in creating humanity in His own image. The notion refers to the very identity of humanity. However, the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 led to a break in this image, or at least the understanding of how the image ought to manifest itself within the lives of humankind. Jesus thus becomes an interesting object of study in light of our salvation. Since salvation comes through Christ, and our identity is to be found in Christ, the identity of Christ himself needs to be understood. Romans 5:12-21 offers a reflection on what it means to be in Adam and to choose to be in Christ. These two figures are important in understanding the identity of human beings in relation to God.

In addition to theological sources, this study seeks to engage with the findings of psychologists and sociologists in understanding identity, in order to facilitate an understanding of forming an identity in Christ in light of one's existing identities. In a society where one mostly gets to choose who they are, it is important that coming to Christ should not be done superficially, as another badge to add on to one's identification. Neither should it be done haphazardly, such that it causes psychological harm in disrupting one's established identity. The study seeks to understand the correct way in forming an identity in Christ, staying true to the Biblical narrative of doing so. In efforts to help prevent believers from going through major identity crisis, or even failing to take on their new identities in Christ.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS**

This study poses the following overarching research question:

What is an identity in Christ from a theological anthropological perspective?

In answering this question, this study poses the following sub-questions:

1. What is identity and identity formation?
2. How can we understand the *imago Dei* in relation to identity?
3. What does it mean to have an identity in Christ?
4. How does one's pre-existing identities influence new identity formations, particularly in Christianity?

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVE**

#### **1.3.1 RESEARCH AIMS**

The aim of this research study is to use an interdisciplinary approach to understand the concept of identity, particularly the formation of a believer's identity in Christ, beyond their identity formation ages.

#### **1.3.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this study is to shed light on identity formation and an identity in Christ from a theological anthropological perspective. It will reach this objective in the following ways:

1. To establish what identity and identity formation is
2. To examine how can we understand the *imago Dei* in relation to identity
3. To set out what it means to have an identity in Christ
4. To examine how one's pre-existing identities could influence new identity formations, particularly in Christianity

### **1.4 CENTRAL THEORETICAL ARGUMENT**

The central theoretical argument of this study is that an understanding of the concept of identity, especially the believer's identity in Christ, can assist in dealing with an identity crisis as it arises in the formation of a new identity. Since identity has been studied across other disciplines, an interdisciplinary understanding of the construct

can help understand the function of establishing a healthy identity in Christ and the benefits therefore of, even beyond one's identity formation years.

## **1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Theology has evolved from telling the story of God's engagement with humankind, to also telling the story of humanity with God. This shift in focus has prompted the study of theological anthropology, which looks into the systematic study of humanity. Theology seeks to find answers about who God is, and for centuries theologians have studied and analysed the identity of God (Wiley, 2018). However, this focus neglects to take into account the age-old question of humanity "who am I?". Thus, theology has taken a turn to interpret theology by taking humanity as the point of departure. Theological anthropology has taken major leaps in understanding what it means to be human in light of God and the order of creation. The ministry of Jesus has also taken the focus of this discipline in forming a basis for understanding that the image of God in creation is restored in Christ. This study seeks to join this conversation by exploring theological anthropology through the lens of the common people who practise theology. It seeks to do an interdisciplinary study of identity formation and manifestation as it relates to everyday young adults who have gone through identity formation. The study will focus on integrating knowledge from theology, psychology, as well as sociology on the issue of identity and identity formation. A focus on my own narrative and identity formation stage will also be included.

This study will begin by exploring literature that already exists concerning identity in the field of theology. Particularly work that integrates Ricoeur's narrative identity, which focus on the Christian concept of righteousness (Lin, 2011). Identity will be briefly discussed as a basic psycho-social construct that all humans establish throughout their lives, with the aim of understanding how Christianity might influence this process. The theology of the self and Scripture verses that inform the concept of having an identity in Christ will be studied and analysed as it relates to the issue of identity and identity formation.

As author of arguably the most influential theological anthropology in recent years, the 2009 work of David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, will be employed in particular, and brought into conversation with other systematic theologians. Apart from its importance as a source on theological anthropology, Kelsey himself identifies the aim of his work as outlining patterns that define and describe “the identity of Christian communities’ common life” (2009:565) and is therefore a fitting main conversation partner in a study on identity. He further indicates the importance of certain anthropological claims being “essential to the identity of communities of Christian faith” (2009:564), again stressing the link between theological anthropology and identity.

The research will be presented in the following manner:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Identity and Identity Formation

Chapter 3: The *imago Dei*

Chapter 4: An identity in Christ

Chapter 5: Conclusion

## **1.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The study will place emphasis on a literature review and narrative analysis. This means that the ethical risk will be low. All sources cited within the text will be referenced. The study aims to give a fair analysis of the study, avoiding all inflammatory and stereotypical language. There will be no interviews conducted within the study, nor any engagement in empirical studies of either quantitative or qualitative nature.

## **1.7 CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

*Identity* can be defined as one’s definition of one’s self, character, goals, and origins (Fearon,1999:10). Identity is a two-fold construct, which encompasses social and

personal categories. These categories can be further broken down and are often designated certain labels, such as “African,” “Christian,” “female,” “heterosexual,” “student,” etc. (Fearon, 1999:10). Identity can thus be simplified to mean the labels one assigns to themselves, when defining who they are.

*Imago Dei* is a Latin term for the image of God found in Genesis 1:26-27. In this passage God creates humankind in His own image, this has been interpreted to mean multiple things. It is a theological term, which denotes the symbolic relationship between God and humanity (Counterbalance, n.d.). In understanding the *imago Dei*, there are three theological main views. The first is the substantive view, which asserts that the image of God consists of certain characteristics within the very nature of human beings (Simango, 2012:638). The relational view, which is the second view, claims that the image of God is the experience of a relationship between human beings and God or between two or more human beings (Simango, 2012:639). The last view considers the image of God as a function performed by human beings, and is known as the functional view (Simango, 2012:639). All these try to explain the relationship between humankind and the image of God and how we ought to interpret our identity as human beings in relation to it. Further discussion about the *imago Dei* will be fleshed out more in the study.

*Theological anthropology* is a compound word where theology concerns itself with the knowledge of God, and anthropology on understanding the human experience (Cameron, 2005:53). Thus, theological anthropology is the theological study of the understanding of human beings. It is the studying of humankind in light of the revealed knowledge of God. The basic understanding is that within the story of God, is the story of humankind; thus, the two are intertwined and the knowledge of God influences one’s knowledge of humanity (Cameron, 2005:54).

*Narrative theology* is sometimes referred to as a postliberal approach to theology (Klaasen, 2017:461). Klaasen (2017:461) states that this form of theology focuses on the role of narrative in moral formation and the individual and collective experiences of human beings in relation to God. The Bible is composed of multiple narratives, which

make up one collective narrative with multiple scenes and themes. The idea of narrative theology is to trace the story between God and human beings beyond the Bible. The narrative of Christian history therefore becomes world history, and individuals connect their own personal stories to God.

## Chapter 2

### Identity and Identity Formation

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Theology turns its lens to the human experience in order to understand how being human influences the relationship between humanity and God. God is at the forefront of theology, and thus understanding Him has been a fundamental goal for proper theological practices and interpretations for centuries. Though humanity plays a secondary role, one cannot deny that understanding human beings is just as essential for the proper expression of the relationship between humanity and God. The very basis of understanding humankind is understanding what exactly constitutes a person and how they view themselves collectively and individually. Thus, identity is pinnacle to understanding the human experience. One ought to know the status of these beings that play such a major role in the subject of Christian Biblical theology. The creation narrative in Genesis 1:27 states:

“God created humanity in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

According to this narrative, human beings are beings created in the image of God, (this concept will be properly discussed in the chapter that follows). This informs us of what humanity was created to be, however, the question of identity and what it means to be in the image of God remains pinnacle to the interpretation of Genesis 1:27. The notion of humanity and what qualifies one to be human has been in discussion for centuries, throughout different disciplines. The subject of identity is not new to theology but has been evolving and growing in volume across time. Humanity’s collective history of colonialism, slavery, wars, the Holocaust, and many other gruesome crimes committed by one group of human beings to another led to a widespread need to

understand what makes one human.<sup>1</sup> The question whether some features make one more human than another has been a vital one in excusing atrocious crimes committed by one group to another. Apartheid, for example, was a system that stripped black people of their human dignity and identity, while maintaining the humanity of white people in South Africa (Van Aarde, 2016:1). Although systems such as Apartheid have been dismantled, their legacy in demarcating identity have remained.

The classifications used to systematise and essentially identify the categories which specific people belong to continue to be used as identity markers. These categories include, but are not limited to race (black, white, coloured); ethnicity (Zulu, Pedi); language (English, Afrikaans); religion (Christian, Muslim, Hindu); sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual); or gender (male, female, non-binary). Politically, these have been and continue to be used as classifications of power and power distribution across the world (Fearon, 1999:1). However, they have also become acceptable social markers or in-group and out-group identifiers, which play a major role in how people perceive as their identities and what makes them human. Fearon's political science thesis *What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?* will be used to understand the two-fold meaning of identity. Fearon (1999:2) states that identity has a double incarnation, the first being social, and the second being the personal characteristics that one attributes to themselves as individuals. This speaks to how an individual views themselves, and other people individually, outside the broader social groups one might already be identified to belong to. With aims to attain a comprehensive theological anthropological understanding of establishing an identity in Christ, findings within other disciplines outside of theology concerning identity and identity formation will be consulted.

The discussion will centre on an interdisciplinary understanding of identity. This interdisciplinary approach will help to inform the theological anthropology of identity and identity formation. As having an identity in Christ is largely emphasised within the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that religion played a major role in the way that identity was theologically defined in the past. And often, these definitions were used as justification for gruesome crimes against other groups of people. This is not the focus of this study, however, therefore this thesis will not discuss the matter in much more detail.

Christian community, the best place to start would be to offer a definition of identity. Fearon (1999) gives a detailed account of the term and how it is understood in the modern world. His political science paper will provide a framework through which identity throughout all disciplines can be understood, establishing an interdisciplinary definition of identity. An in-depth psychological interpretation of identity will be offered, analysing the notion of identity formation as it pertains to human development. Once an understanding of both identity and identity formation are rendered, a brief theological conclusion will be gathered from the data. Based on Scripture and theological interpretations concerning identity, an understanding of the concept of identity in Christ will then be offered. This will form a foundation for the discussion in understanding the process of identity formation in believers, informing the theological anthropological understanding of identity and having an identity in Christ.

## **2.2 WHAT IS IDENTITY?**

Identity is a widely studied across multiple disciplines. This is because human identity influences all spheres of life. It has inspired much research and often gone through a series of refinement in different eras and across multiple disciplines. Within Christian communities the notion of one attaining an identity in Christ is often loosely thrown around in everyday conversation. Yet, an explanation is rarely offered for such a complex term. There is almost an assumed understanding of the term, which may, more often than not, lead to confusion and misunderstandings. It is important that identity is understood at its most basic understanding, such that when the term is applied, there is clear knowledge of what is meant by it. This will allow also for clarity to be gained concerning the direction one should be thinking of when the concept of identity in Christ is brought about, laying a solid foundation for the discussion of this concept, and the formation thereof.

The APA dictionary (2022) defines identity as:

... an individual's sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles. Identity involves

a sense of continuity, or the feeling that one is same today that ne was yesterday or last year (Despite physical and other changes). Such a Sense is derived from one's body sensations; one's body image; and the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self. Also called personal identity.

This definition allows one to understand the personal aspect of identity, which speaks to the individual person and who they perceive themselves to be. There are a range of factors which influence identity. The affiliations which one takes on aren't always voluntary; often these affiliations are ascribed to a person based on their place of origin, their ethnicity, their biological sex, the texture of their hair, the colour of their eyes, etc. All of which have nothing to do with us or choices we might have made. These are ascribed to us involuntary, through no choice of our own. These features are sometimes understood to be permanent or long lasting, thus bear a great deal in the way in which we identify ourselves. Some of these affiliations are chosen by us, either collectively or individually. These include one's religion, academic path, career, social circles, sports club affiliation, etc. Such categories are often more voluntary, freely chosen by those who carry them. Still amongst those one has social roles that are ascribed to them throughout different stages of their lives such as child, student, theologian, mother, sister, all of which would also form a great part in the way one experiences themselves. One's unique identity will influence all spheres of their life, including their memories, goals, choices, expectations, and so forth. A person should therefore have an understanding of themselves in order to fully come to grasp with their lived reality and have a thorough knowledge of their personal identity.

Fearon (1999:2) begins by noting that identity as we know it today refers to one's personal and social identities. Therefore, identity as we understand it has double manifestation, it refers to both the social categories ascribed to an individual while at the same time it refers to the sources of an individual's self-respect and dignity (Fearon, 1999:2). Identity is thus plural or understood in multiplicities as opposed to a single entity. One holds more than one identity at a time. One might think of personal identity as their personal characteristics or attributes that cannot be expressed in terms

of a social category (Fearon, 1999:2) In other words, personal identities might be the attributes that make one different from the social categories they carry. Socially, an individual might be African or black, and personally, they can be a rock artist. These two identities do not always manifest themselves together, thus the personal identity might in some instances be those identities that seem to differentiate you from the rest of the group. To fully understand the definition of identity, personal and social identities will be discussed.

### **2.3 PERSONAL IDENTITY**

Personal identity is defined by Fearon (1999:11) as:

A set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in social relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but which is so orient her behaviour that she would be at a loss about how to act and what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to.

The best way to describe identity in ordinary conversation would be to answer the question 'Who am I?' Answering this question will help one identify what things are most important to themselves and crucial to their identity (Fearon, 1999:21). The answers do not necessarily answer the question of identity effectively, however, since identity is quite a complex entity. In essence, personal identity may also be defined as those properties of oneself which one cannot be altered without the person changing into a completely different person (Fearon, 1999:22). There are properties that are held as unchangeable without becoming a completely different person. These include aspects of oneself that one feels unable to change, or which they cannot choose to change. The notion would be that if these attributes are changed, the individual would experience a loss of identity, thus experience a completely different version of themselves. Race and ethnicity are specific examples of unchangeable features of one's identities. One cannot just wake up and decide to identify as someone of a different race or ethnicity. As a black Xhosa woman, I cannot just choose to wake up tomorrow and identify as a white Afrikaner man. These parts of my identity are

unchangeable. Of course, this applies even when these aspects bring one much pain and shame. Hence, one of the crimes of racial discrimination is to dehumanise an individual based on an aspect of themselves they can essentially never change and to rob them of the dignity of being human based on this.

Personal identity also includes other aspects or attributes of an individual (Fearon, 1999:23). These include physical attributes, memberships in specific social categories, person-specific beliefs, goals, moral principles, or personal style. Fearon (1999:23) states that personal identity must also be those attributes that a person is conscious of, and which set them apart at least from some others. Personal identity cannot be aspects of yourself that you have no awareness of, as you cannot identify personally with something you have no knowledge of. One who does not know they are battling with cancer, will not identify as someone fighting against cancer, nor would they be able to relate to those battling with cancer, unless an awareness of the condition is brought to the individual.

Furthermore, personal identity are also those aspects and attributes which one takes pride in, or the attributes and aspects whose loss would entail a loss of self-respect (Fearon, 1999:23). A lot of the aspects that one holds dear are linked to who they consider themselves to be. Within the black community, there is great respect that is fostered with the idea of being human. The Bantu tribes are commonly associated with the Nguni saying “Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which loosely translates as humans make a human. Fearon (1999:16) observes importantly that social identities in many ways constitutes personal identity. In other words, labels used to identify social groups in many cases apply to personal identity. One might identify personally as a Christian, but Christianity is a broader religious concept that also carries social implications. The same applies to many personal aspects of personal identity. Social identity is defined simply as the identity assumed by a collective body of people.

## **2.4 SOCIAL IDENTITY**

As stated above, identity can be simply understood as the manner in which one defines themselves or who one says they are; who one chooses to identify as often applies to

their affiliation to a larger social group. Having a social identity means being a part of a certain group, being like those within the group, or seeing things from their perspective (Burke & Stets, 2000:226). One who is A Christian identifies personally as a follower of Christ, but in the same statement belongs to the greater body of believers, the body of Christ at large. In identifying as a Christian, one admits to belonging to the greater group; this is one's social identity. One's social identity is a person's knowledge that she belongs to that particular social category (Stets & Burke, 200:225). Social identity is defined as a social category, either one assigned to themselves or assigned to them by others (Fearon, 1999:13). One would then need to understand what negates a social category, as surely, not every category is necessarily a social identity. In the case of social identity, a social category refers to a group of individuals who have a common social identification or view themselves as members of this social category (Stets & Burke, 200:225). Labels are assigned to people based on shared characteristics, but people may also choose to take on labels based on the common characteristics shared with certain people. For example, in a primary school a group of girls who have pink bags might choose to start a friend group based on this characteristic. Assigning themselves the 'pink bag girls' would thus be a fitting label to them. This might not necessarily become a social category, however, unless it fulfils two distinguishing features.

Fearon (1999:13) argues that social categories have implicit or explicit rules of membership. These rules of membership would determine whether an individual forms part of the group or not. In our example, the group of girls with pink bags would have to come together and create these rules of membership. These rules might not even be too strict, for example, anyone (male or female) who owns a pink bag might be welcomed to the group; or they might be stricter and even exclusive, allowing only a few people the right to go and buy a pink bag, and banning all others from doing so. The second feature that a group needs to fulfil in order to be understood as a social category is to have set characteristics, which are considered typical of those within the group, or exhibit certain behaviours expected or obliged. Fearon calls this the content of a social category (Fearon, 1999:14). What would distinguish the girls with the pink school bags from this particular school, which would qualify them as a social category, thus a social identity, would be set characteristics that one needs to fulfil in order to be

a part of the group. Girls with pink bags might be thought of as pretty and smart. Thus, if a girl was not considered pretty but owned a pink bag, she would not be considered a pink bag girl.

Social identity is assigned to the group at large, within different social groups there are different role and type identities assigned to individuals. Role identities speaks to the roles that individuals occupy and are expected to fulfil. These roles can be identities like mother, sister, friend, theologian, lecturer, etc. These are identities that need one to fulfil some actions, behaviours, or functions in specific situations (Fearon, 1999:17). Role identities are fluid and can often exist simultaneously; in the same situation, one can be a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. The membership rules for role identities are often societal (Fearon, 1999:17). Different societies reserve the right to prescribe these identities, and often one needs to fulfil certain requirements before they can assume the role. One does not just become a medical practitioner simply because they own a stethoscope and a white coat, there are certain requirements that one needs to fulfil to assume that role. Of course, some requirements are as simple as being born to a family of four siblings, immediately assuming the role of little sister to four other people born to the same parents. Type identities are less formal and do not always require one to fulfil any characteristics. Fearon (1999:17) establishes that:

... [t]ype identities refer to labels applied to persons who share or are thought to share some characteristic or characteristics, in appearance, behavioural traits, beliefs, attitudes, values, skills (e.g., language), knowledge, opinions, experience, historical commonalities (like region or place of birth), and so on.

Roles may not always be associated with these labels (type identities), beyond the fact that they are. Nationality, sexual identity, ethnicity, and political affiliations are all examples of type identities. There are no set criteria for what a South African is, at best it can be said that it is one who was born in any one of the nine provinces of South Africa. There is no strict procedure that every individual needs to undergo in order to attain national identity. Often one simply gains a national identity by being born within a certain country. Identities can be both type and role identities. One is said to be a

mother once they have given birth to a child, making mother a type identity. However, there are also social norms and expectations that one is required to fulfil as a mother, which make one a mother, making mother also a role identity.

Identity as a construct is only becoming an issue of central discussion in our contemporary society, since it was never much of an issue before (Howard, 2000:367). In the past identity was simply assigned, but in today's society there is the burden of selecting and adopting certain identities at will (Howard, 2000:367). This freedom to choose identities in a fast-paced ever-changing society is the reason the issue of identity has taken centre stage, and also needs to be studied from a theological anthropological viewpoint. Since people now have the freedom to attain identities, one ought to understand when this process takes place within human development and how it develops, so as to understand the value of identity within an individual's life.

## **2.5 IDENTITY FORMATION**

It has been indicated that identity is a construct which is both assigned and adopted. Accordingly, an individual goes through processes within their development stages which fosters this process of identity construction. Identity is largely cognitive, with the exploration of identities taking place mostly within the individual's mind, in establishing an understanding of themselves. Erikson theorises that identity development takes place predominantly during one's adolescence stage of development (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). During this time, one goes through what is called an identity crisis (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). This is a period of time where an individual explores their existing values and standards, questioning their values according to their lived reality (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). The individual goes through a series of experimentation, exploring and questioning, in order to develop their own values and morals (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). Since adolescence is the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood, it is through their identity crisis that an individual realises their role in the adult world. Identity formation takes place once firm identities are realised through whatever process an adolescence takes to reach a conclusion on who they are. During this period an individual has to form a "continuous, integrated, unified image of the self" (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). Therefore, allowing said individual to feel that they are the

same person throughout different periods of time, space, and circumstances. Their social identity is formed during this period, where they decide which social groups they belong to and explore the belief systems of those that they have been assigned and assumed to belong to. In other words, racial, ethnic, national, and other such social identities are explored.

Gender identities are further established (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). During identity formation, individuals not only accept the changes that come with sexual maturity, but they must also accept or reject their assumed identity as male or female (Louw & Louw, 2014:342). Individuals cognitively think through what it means to be a certain gender and either accept or reject their given gender and status within society. Different cultures assume different social norms and attributes to gender, thus the acceptance or rejection of gender identities is largely cultural. It is also during this stage that many individuals challenge gender roles and identifications. Malala Yusef, Nobel Peace Prize winner, is a prime example of one who accepts her gender, yet challenged the societal stance associated with it.

Religious identity is another theme explored during identity formation. In this period, one determines whether their values and morals align with the religious system they have been exposed to. It is also during this time period when other religious systems are explored and questioned. The identity crisis is probably the most confusing cognitive period of an individual's development. Systems that have been standing longer than the individual has been alive come into question and are rigorously criticised, individually by different people going through the same process at the same time. The identity crisis is an essential part of development, as it leads to identity formation. The individual is tasked with accepting and challenging certain realities, societal expectations, roles, norms, etc. Perhaps this is the reason the youth play such a pinnacle role in major resistances against oppression throughout history.

## **2.6 IDENTITY IN THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT**

Theological thought around identity has further provided an understanding of identity over time. Louw (2012:61) theorises that identity encompasses more than mere knowledge of the self and understanding one's own characteristics. Identity is considered to be more than just one's expression of who they are or who they believe

themselves to be. In theological thought, identity is more than one's feelings about themselves, or the functions and roles that one assumes. Louw (2012:61) contends that "identity refers to the dynamics of human responsibility within the systematic realm of human relationships." Identity speaks to the ways in which an individual responds to certain people and individuals. It is more observable as it manifests in one's relational interactions and dynamics. The notion of identity is founded on responsibility, "I am responsible and respond-able, therefore I am" (Louw, 2012:61). This is not to say the intrinsic value is not valuable in understanding identity. Instead, identity is a process that interplays a number of aspects; who one understands themselves to be through self-understanding and self-evaluation; the role functions which one assumes, including their acceptance and rejection of themselves; their external processing of societal norms, "values, belief systems, world views and paradigms"; as well as those factors embedded in one's culture and cultural practices (Louw, 2012:62). These interplay across time to form identity.

The formation of one's identity is not linear, but rather a zigzag process between this process. Identity denotes sameness, meaning being the same today, tomorrow and the day after that, this is known as continuity (Louw, 2012:62). Louw also indicates that identity construction is a dynamic process, a to-and-fro movement between the experiences of the person and the reaction of the environment (2012:62). During the identity formation period, one negotiates their identity, and fosters it by accepting it, behaving in line with it, surrendering to it, and experiences congruency by choosing to be faithful to themselves and who they have proven themselves to be, through thought and actions. Authentic identity requires one to discover that God calls them to respond to their purpose, which can be simply put as loving God and loving their neighbour (Louw, 2012:62). Thus, identity formation in theological anthropology is a process of discovering this purpose and mapping out how one will live it out in their everyday life. It requires continuity and not just single events. Identity remains a complex construct, even in the field of theology.

## **2.7 IDENTITY IN CHRIST**

The term 'Christian' is generally accepted to refer to followers of Jesus Christ, and can also mean *Christ-like*; this means that those who claim to be Christians, assert that

their identity is like (similar) to that of Christ. In the next chapter this notion will be further evaluated. Therefore, when one is speaking of their identity in Christ, they are talking to the ways in which they are like Christ. Asserting that one is Christian has a dual meaning, as do most identity markers. The in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the notion of collective identity, social identity:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

Those who claim to be followers of Christ, are said to belong to one body. In this chapter Paul addresses the function of spiritual gifts amongst the body of believers. Each individual is identified as a member of the body. The idea is a single body, therefore when one claims to be Christian, they are socially choosing to be a part of this one body and take on the social identity that comes with this identity. If one is raised within a household where one or both their parents are Christian, then during their identity crisis stage of development, they get to decide and choose for themselves whether they want to remain a part of the same body. Paul does a similar thing in the book of Galatians. Baker (2011:233) theorises that in the book of Galatians, Paul functions as an architect of group identity, helping both the Judean and non-Judean Christians to draw boundaries between in-group Judean readers and out-group Judean readers. Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul purposefully creates and maintains the group identity of those who are followers of Christ (Baker, 2011:232-233). This establishes that there is a collective social identity in one's walk with Christ.

Christianity also answers the question, "who am I?" individualistically. When one assumes the Christian identity, they personally choose to view the world through a certain paradigm, using the lens of Christianity to tell their story and shape their own personal narrative. Thus, the statement, 'I am a Christian' speaks largely to the identity the person has chosen to ascribe to. Much of the commitment one shows to God is

largely individualistic. Even in the Judean tradition, it is Abraham's individual faith, and the covenant between Abraham and God, which establishes the nation of Israel. The Old Testament records the different narratives concerning the covenants and relationships that God had with different individual's and based on their obedience or disobedience. Thus, as much as Christianity is social, in the inclusion of all as the body or Christ, there is also the commitment of every member of the body. Each part has an individual function. Holistically the body functions, but individually the body exists. A person cannot claim to be a Christian simply because of their association with other Christians. For example, unlike ethnicity, where one can simply be born Jewish, and later accepts this ethnic identity, Christianity is not an ethnicity one can be born into. One makes the conscious decision, as Joshua did (Joshua 24:15).

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

Identity is defined as interpersonal characteristics which an individual chooses, and in some cases, learns to accept as their own, and these establish them as an individual. These characteristics range from one's affiliations to the social roles assumed. Psychology emphasises that it is important that in the formation of an identity one feels a sense of continuity. Continuity simply asserts that one feels the same today, tomorrow, last year and in five years' time, despite the many changes they might go through. Fearon theorises that identity is both personal and social. Personal identity refers to attributes, beliefs, desires, principles which an individual believes sets them apart from the broader society. These do not necessarily have to be characteristics that an individual takes pride in. They are merely behaviours which are assumed to be distinct in describing who one is. For example, one who has Tourette's Syndrome, might not take pride in their tics, but they use these as attributes to describe who they are individually. Personal identity is largely thought of to be unchangeable, even if one desires to do so. One might not particularly like their ethnicity, and even desire to change their ethnicity, however, this remains an unchangeable attribute of their identity.

Social identity is not exclusive from individual identity, in fact many identities which are said to be personal, are also social. Social identity simply means being a part of a certain group and meeting the rules set for membership. Social identity may also

include assigned roles and labels as part of membership. Identity formation is a pinnacle part during one's adolescent years as it helps clear the stage of identity crisis. Forming and developing an identity is a natural part of human development.

Thus, the notion of having an identity in Christ does not exist in isolation. Instead, it is recognised as an essential part of an individual's cognitive development. Note that identity is largely a cognitive construct, and the only way that anyone can truly know the identity development of any individual is if they communicate it. Thus, narrative theology is fundamentally important in understanding the process of Christian identity formation. The Holy Bible helps the Christian community understand that identity is indeed both personal and social. In the next chapter, the notion of Identity in Christ will be further discussed by referring to the *imago Dei*, humanity created in and according to the image of God.

## Chapter 3

### The *imago Dei*

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided an interdisciplinary understanding of the concepts of identity and identity formation. This chapter will narrow the discussion down to understanding the concept of identity in Christ. Identity in Christ implies that the process of identity formation takes place considering Christ. In other words, identity formation is largely influenced by Christ and what is revealed in Scripture.

For Christians to develop an identity in Christ there needs to be an understanding of who Christ is, as He is revealed concerning His identity and the identity of the collective body of Christ in the Word. Theologians have studied the connection between the *imago Dei* and humanity's identity in creation (Wiley, 2018; Erickson, 2013; Migliore, 2004). This connection is concluded to be the very essence of human identity in Christ. Since identity has been theorised to be both a social and personal construct, it is pinnacle to understand the concept of having an identity in Christ; as it plays itself out in society, and as individuals narrate it to be through their own personal experiences. Theology influences not only how one views themselves, but also how they view others around them. Identity encompasses one's responsibility and the actions which they take to live out this responsibility. This chapter will explore the notion of having an identity in Christ.

Forming a new identity in Christ is a major theme throughout the New Testament. When speaking to Nicodemus concerning the requirements to inherit the kingdom of God, Jesus reveals in John 3:3 that one needs to be born again. This idea introduced by Jesus is that one needs to assume a new spiritual identity for them to inherit the kingdom of God. In Galatians 2:20, Paul addresses the church of Galatia and expresses his new identity in Christ, giving us a glimpse of how this new assumed identity manifests itself in the lives of believers:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Paul here embodies what Jesus was communicating to Nicodemus. Dying is a large part of being born again<sup>2</sup>; one's old identity dies, as they take on a new identity in Christ. The understanding that Paul had on this new identity was that Christ lived in him. Believers ought to understand what Paul meant by this statement, as it plays out to how they embody this new identity that they assume throughout their walk of faith. Ephesians 2:4 further emphasises this point, by elaborating to the church of Ephesus the state of the old nature, which is old and corrupt, thus believers are encouraged to put on their new identities in Christ. This new person that one ought to put on, bares the same implication as being born again, as Jesus implied to Nicodemus. The new identity, put on by believers, shall be the subject of study.

A theological anthropological interpretation of identity in Christ will be discussed. This chapter will begin by discussing the *imago Dei*, specifically analysing the creation narrative and analysing what the *imago Dei* reveals about the collective, as well as individual, identity of humankind. Understanding the *imago Dei* will form a foundation in understanding the notion of an identity in Christ. Once this is understood, the fall of humanity, and theories around the implications of the fall on the *imago Dei* will be analysed. The Person of Christ, who forms the basis of this new identity, as the second Adam will be discussed, with the intention of establishing the link between Christ and the *imago Dei*. I will follow this by discussing the different ways which followers of Christ might embody this identity. This will provide the reader with a detailed understanding of what having an identity in Christ means and how it translates itself in the biblical narrative, as well as modern narratives of the individual and collective Christian identity. One's understanding of the Christian identity will be understood as

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<sup>2</sup> Being born again and regeneration are important aspects of the doctrinal locus of soteriology. While there is some overlap between all doctrines, which is also the case here, due to the limitations of this study, soteriology and the notion of rebirth will not be examined in greater detail.

more than a theological construct, but also as it translates as a psychological construct.

### 3.2 THE *IMAGO DEI*

The Bible, in the book of Genesis, records how the world was created. The author notes, from a third person perspective, how everything was created in six days, the seventh an assigned day of rest. Creation can be used as a basis to determine the identity of creation. The *imago Dei* refers specifically to Genesis 1:26-27, which states:

Then God said, “Let Us make humankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth.” So God created humanity in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

*Imago Dei* is the Latin term for the ‘image of God’ (Samples, 2011). This Scripture emphasises two main terms, namely ‘image’ (Hebrew *tselem*) and ‘likeness’ (Hebrew *demut*) (Rosner, 2017:81). This Scripture makes it clear that both male and female were created in the image of God. The repetition of image and likeness in the verse does not denote difference, it is a form of Hebrew parallelism<sup>3</sup>. It draws the reader’s attention to the notion that the being to be created will be made in the image of the One who creates. This is highlighted when the author writes, “God created humanity in His own image”; humanity is created in the image of God, nothing is said about the likeness. Therefore, one can conclude that image and likeness can be used interchangeably, as synonyms (Rosner, 2017:81). Human beings are created in the image of God.

The observation through the creation of humankind in the *imago Dei* has led to numerous conclusions and discussions concerning the identity of humanity. The natural assumption is that the creature created here is one that functions as God

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrew parallelism is a poetic device employed throughout Biblical texts, particularly the Psalms. This feature is often found in poetic passages, a feature which can be used to describe this passage, as the language used is poetic.

functions. This is considered the functional view of the *imago Dei*. This view is the age-old understanding of the image of God, which is increasing in popularity - the notion is that it is in action that one exhibits the image of God (Ericksen, 2013:462). Thus, the image God is an external expression often expressed in having dominion over the earth. Those who interpret it as such hang onto the second part of Genesis 1:26, “and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth.” And deem that to be the very image that God was creating humanity into. In other words, the expression of the *imago Dei* is the rulership of human beings. Such an interpretation, Migliore notes, “is often associated with a worldview in which all relationships are construed in hierarchical patterns” (2004:140). While this perspective has been utilised in the past to justify exploitation, understood right the dominion that is referred to “involves respect, protection, and care for others rather than mastery and manipulation” (Migliore, 2004:141). However, this is only one of the prominent views in scholarly thought concerning the understanding of the *imago Dei*.

The second view is relational, it views the *imago Dei* from a relational stance. To many modern theologians, the *imago Dei* is expressed through experiencing and establishing a relationship with God (Ericksen, 2013:460). As one forges relationships with each other, other creatures, and the Creator throughout their life, they are experiencing the image of God. But humans are said to fully experience the image of God when in relationship with Him, particularly (Ericksen, 2013:460). According to this perspective, being human is living freely and joyfully “in relationships of mutual respect and love” (Migliore, 2004:141).

The substantive view is the third view, which deems that there is an element of human make up that was made in the image of God (Ericksen, 2013:457). Although there is no clear consensus on what exactly it is within the human makeup which constitutes the image of God, some argue that it is the physical aspect of humans which constitutes the *imago Dei* (Ericksen, 2013:457; Migliore, 2004:140). Although the substantive view is unable to pinpoint what exactly constitutes the *imago Dei* in the human makeup, the view holds that all of humankind have this element, which makes them distinct from other created beings.

Another interpretation focuses on the notion of human freedom as the meaning of the image of God, emphasising the aspects of self-determination and creativity that humankind shares with their Creator (Migliore, 2004:141).

Since this study concerns itself with identity, the *imago Dei* is argued to be the foundation of human identity. Therefore, the *imago Dei* must fulfil the proposed definition for identity. Using the proposed definition for identity in the previous chapter, *imago Dei* can be defined as humanity's sense of being experienced through a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that are not shared by any other created being. These constitute a range of roles and functions that humans occupy apply themselves within. Since identity involves a sense of continuity, what was considered the *imago Dei* at creation must continue to be the *imago Dei* throughout all ages. This includes humanity's relation with not only each other and the rest of creation, but most importantly, their relationship with God. This definition merges the substantive, functional, and relational view of the *imago Dei* to form one understanding.

### **3.3 UNDERSTANDING GOD**

To understand the concept of the image of God, one would have to understand God, the original Creator, who fashioned humanity. The author of Genesis seems to assume that the reader already knows what the phrase 'image of God' means, since he does not delve into describing what this means, neither does he dwell on this point further than the poetic repetition of the phrase, drawing emphasis to it. Consequently, we have to rely on narrative experiences revealed in the texts of the Old and New Testament to understand who God has revealed Himself to be.

In the very beginning of the book of Genesis, the author assumes God, "In the beginning God..." The author provides no context or foreknowledge of this God, merely a reflection of the creating power of God. This chapter reveals God creating, then God observing at the end of each day that His creation is good. Thus, God is introduced to the modern reader as a Creator, a God who brings order into chaos. Peterson (2016:73) notes the argument that God, in Ancient Near Eastern traditions, had a 'functional oncology' where God does not create from nothing, but instead through creation God brings order, identity, function, and diversity to creation. This

characteristic of God is revealed throughout His recorded interactions with humanity. The entire Bible is characterised with moments where God interrupts humanity to bring about order and function – consider the narrative of the covenantal relationship God had with the different individuals in Scripture. Each relationship brings about order and function. Consider how God gave laws within these covenants which bring about order and function to the world and the nation of Israel. Consider when Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32:22-32, in verse twenty-eight the angel of the Lord gives Jacob a new identity, and this identity becomes the identity marker for all his offspring throughout the Old Testament. Strikingly, in the creation of humanity, we see God creating humanity on the sixth day, giving them their identity and function, while also making humanity diverse.

The author observes an intimate moment God has in Genesis one verse twenty-six, where God has a conversation saying, “let us create humanity...” God is a consulting God, He communicates His intentions before He does them, particularly where humanity is concerned. When the world was corrupt and He wanted to destroy it, the Lord communicated His intentions to Noah, recorded in Genesis 6. God communicated before He confused the languages of the people, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis 11:7). Throughout the Old Testament God communicated His intentions to the nation of Israel through His prophets, and those chosen to deliver the message of God. The first chapter of the book of Luke records how at the birth of Jesus, an angel was sent to announce to Mary and Joseph that the Saviour was to be born. Therefore, one of the characteristics that is revealed throughout the narrative is that God is communicative. Though little description is given concerning this being, these characteristics provide insight on Who God is.

Since it is the revealed knowledge of God that helps us know who God is, the identity of God, it is essential to consider who God says He is. Humanity might be able to characterise God through their individual experiences. Humanity might even name God based on these experiences. The Bible states that Hagar, through her experience with God named Him, *Ei Roi* (the God who sees me) (Genesis 16:11). Abraham characterises Him as Jehovah Jireh (the Lord will provide), based on his experiences walking with God. Such instances are not uncommon in the Old and New Testament. However, the characterisation of God is not necessarily the identity of God. It is merely

who God has revealed Himself to be to those specific individuals. But God cannot be limited to an individual's experience of Him. Because different individuals will have a different characteristic to ascribe to God. Understanding God, as He identifies Himself, might be the closest humanity can come to truly knowing God. In the Old Testament, the narrative concerning the walk of Moses and God, is probably the only narrative where an individual asked God, who He says He is. God in-turn answers Moses and tells Him, who He is,

And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "This is what you shall say to the sons of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

*"ehyeh asher ehyeh"* is the Hebrew phrase for "I am who I am" (Simcox, 2003). At this point many would expect that God would go into a simile describing to Moses who He is. But instead, God declares Himself to be. No explanation for what this phrase possibly means. There are numerous studies around this phrase, however one thing is for sure. God is the literal translation for the Hebrew phrase can be *"I will be what it shall be. Whatever happens, I am it. I am your past, I am your present, I am your future"* (Simcox, 2003). God makes no attempt to describe who He is, He simply is. God offers no definite description for who He is, His identity remains vague, but what the believer can take away is that God remains. He is. At the root of it all God is the very essence of being itself. Since this is the case, the argument is made that to know God, one ought to experience Him. Through individual experiences people can narrate their experiences, which informs who humanity experiences God to be. Humanity's recorded experiences in the Bible help to characterise God, but it is important to always bear in mind that one's experience of God is not the be all of God. God is more than an individual experience of Him. God chooses to reveal Himself to humanity over time, but humanity in turn needs to be observing and listening to God to grasp the character of God. Many of the revealed attributes of God came from experiences that people had with God, then expressed through worship who He had revealed Himself to be. Peterson (2016:88) states that when the divine revelation of who God is received

it leads to the glorification of God. Part of this glorification is ascribing a name or a revealed identity of God.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.4 ADAM AND EVE: THE IMAGE OF GOD

Peterson (2016:75) argues that one ought to understand the *imago Dei* as human identity, the identity given to humanity by God, Himself. Thus, an important aspect in understanding identity, and what it is, is understanding that humanity was created in the image of God, therefore, humanity is the image of God.

Then God said, “Let Us make humankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth.” So God created humanity in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Humankind, in this instance, refers specifically to the first male and female created. The cited verse reflects God’s relationship with humanity, and how God intended humans to be when He created them. It is interesting that there is a case of Hebrew parallelism within these two verses, as it reflects the poetic nature of the creation of humanity. Unlike the other creatures created, where God created and said it was good, in the creation of humans, God speaks to Himself, and instructs Himself to create a being in His own image. With the instruction, the Creator reveals the role and function of humankind. Then follows the creation by reflecting that it is very good (Genesis 1:31). Peterson (2016:74) makes the interesting observation that humankind being created in the image of God is foundational to their creation; meaning they were created in the image of God, and the image of God was not merely an addition to an already created being. The first chapter of Genesis should aim to understand God’s action, in creation, as establishing identity for the creatures (Peterson, 2016:75). Therefore, when God created humanity, He established the identity to be the image of

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<sup>4</sup> The discussion on the identity of God is much broader than this study allows. This chapter therefore restricts its use here to the image of God in humanity.

God. Humanity's identity is thus in relation with God. Adam and Eve, the first male and female, set a precedence for the rest of humanity. The identity of Israel, as well as the church rests on this premise of being created in the image of God (Peterson, 2016:78). It can be argued that since little is revealed about who God is throughout Scripture, outside of individual experiences, one cannot understand human identity. However, if humankind is made in the image of God, then God is the one who reveals who humanity is. Thus, as an individual is in communion with God, they uncover the characteristics of God, and gain an understanding of who they are, the identity of humanity.

Adam and Eve were the first created beings. Their creation forms the foundation of the creation of all of humanity. The Biblical narrative establishes that all of humanity can trace their origins back to the first created beings Adam and Eve. The genealogy accounts found throughout the Bible are proof that this is indeed true, and whole nations can trace their belonging and birth right, to when the very first human beings were created. The sole premise of their creation is that they might be an image of God, their Creator. Both male and female were made in the image of God. Individually, they were created male and female. This is what made them unique from each other. But they are fundamentally tied to each other through their differences, as their differences allow for communion and fellowship with each other. Humans are social beings, and have been from creation (Rosner, 2017:76). Migliore also remarks that the image of God should not be understood as a permanent stamped image, but "more like an image reflected in a mirror. That is, human beings are created for life in relationships that mirror or correspond to God's own life in relationships" (2004:141).

Consider the popular Bantu proverb, "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" loosely translated "I am because you are." This saying emphasises that what bonds all of people to each other is their humanity. Since identity has to do with in-group relations, being human is what bonds humanity to each other across time and space. All other parts of creation forms part of the out-group, as no other creation is made in the image of God. Creation encompasses the concept of ubuntu, it is in unity that Adam and Eve are created and instructed to function within creation.

Both Adam and Eve attain their identity from God who reveals both their role and function through creation. Created on the sixth day after all other creatures, the role of dominion over all of creation was given to Adam and Eve. Within this role is the

function of stewardship. Humankind was created to steward God's creation in a manner which reflects God's glory as supreme Creator (Vorster, 2020:3). In their creation, God establishes that part of their function here on earth would be take rule over all of creation. Thus, an element of humanity, is to function as ruler, exercising dominion and stewardship over all the earth. This is a role and function unique to humanity, no other creature in creation has dominion over all of humanity, including humanity.

As God is not limited to being solely a ruler, having dominion over all of creation, however, neither should the identity of humankind be limited to this role and function. The identity of Adam and Eve in this case relates to them as a 'society', humankind, and their individual differences. Together, they are identified as the image of God. This collective attribute as mentioned above refers to their identity as social beings. Humans are relational. Part of the *imago Dei* is expressed in relationships. Humankind can forge a relationship with God, which is a unique feature that humans have in creation. Vorster (2020:3) notes that relationality remains one of the most important parts of being human. The relational aspect of humanity is clearly an element observed in God through creation and throughout the Bible. Consider the description of the narration of Genesis 3. God walks into the garden, He talks to Adam and Eve, as one would talk to a loved one. The communication of God throughout the Old Testament testifies to the relational aspect of God's character. In establishing that God created them male and female, the author acknowledges that God created them to have relationship with each other (Vorster, 2020:3). Since it is after God's image that they are created, God is the source of human existence, including the existence of community.

Human beings are made from the dust of the earth, perhaps, like God Himself, connected to the very creation they are made custodians of. Since God identifies Himself as the Ultimate Being, He reveals that He is tied to all forms of being. This notion can be what inspired creating a being from the very ground which humanity would eventually care for. Vorster (2020:3), notes the emphasis brought by Genesis two on humankind being made from the dust – a notion that they are “embedded in nature”. This same notion is expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:20, which notes that humankind comes from dust, and to dust they return. After God had decided to make humanity in His image, He formed a human being out of the dust of the earth, and into

the human being's nostril He breathed the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Kelsey also highlights the notion of breath in his theological anthropology, which will be returned to in the following section, by referring to the notion of living on borrowed breath. Referencing the breath that God actively breathes into His creation, he mentions that "our ultimate context as creatures is the active creativity of God" (Kelsey, 2009:162).

Locating the *imago Dei* has been discussed over the ages. Often this leads to an improper identification of the *imago Dei* as only one aspect of humanity (Vorster, 2020:3). For example, humanity might be theorised to simply be the body, or a certain physical feature of humanity. Or it might even be characterised to be the soul, argued to be the breath of life which God breathes into the body to bring to life (Vorster, 2020:3). However, Vorster (2020:3) counters these theories, by asserting that the "Old Testament writers understood the human as an undivided psycho-somatic unit." Therefore, the discussion of the human identity in relation to the *imago Dei* should lean towards being more descriptive than it is prescriptive. The *Imago Dei* distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. Humans are fundamentally, as informed by Genesis 1:26, different from the rest of creation in their identity - nonetheless interconnected with it as it was from the very substance of creation that they were formed.

### **3.5 SIN: THE IMAGE OF GOD DISTORTED**

Genesis chapter 3 records the beginning of the fall of humanity. Reformed theology asserts that it was at this point that the original sin was committed. The doctrine of original sin conveys that Adam and Eve, the first created human beings, committed sin which introduced the "systematic, corporate and total power of sin," which in turn leads to the inevitability of sin (Vorster, 2020:4). Individually people do not have to be persuaded to sin, in fact one can rightly predict that humanity will eventually sin. Vorster (2020:4) explains that this is because humanity tries to save themselves from foreseeable danger by exploiting the gift of freewill given to humanity at creation. This need to protect ourselves from danger, is due to an insecurity within humankind caused by a lack of trust in God, thus efforts are made to have double security from danger (Vorster, 2020:4). A good illustration of this, is the reaction of Adam and Eve after they sin, Genesis 3:10, "He said, 'I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I

was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” Adam and Eve, upon eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, try to provide their own security, first by sewing themselves garments from fig leaves (Genesis 3:7), then, when they hear God coming, they do something they had never done before, they hide from God. Both were attempts to keep secure themselves, beyond the security already provided by God. The nation of Israel did the same thing after escaping slavery in Egypt, at Mount Sinai. While Moses was getting instruction from the Lord, Exodus 32 records that the people became uneasy and wanted a god to lead them since Moses had been gone for a long time. Instead of trusting in God, and honouring the covenant they had with Him, they forged an idol from their jewellery to worship and provide them a way out of the desert that Moses, through the guidance of God had brought them into. They tried to provide themselves with protection from the situation they had been brought into. Instead of worship, and feasting for the Lord, who brought them to that place, they turned their backs on Him and made a god for themselves, that they believed would save them from their predicament. Their lack of trust in God, just like Adam and Eve, caused them to turn to their own ways.

The effect of sin on humankind shaped humanity’s identity formation. Trust and communion with God were no longer the foundation; instead, at the root sin created mistrust, that is transmitted from individual to individual. To deal with this insecurity, humanity stays in the system of sin, and the wage of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Vorster (2020:4) quotes that humankind’s immediate response to the call of God is disobedience, and defiance to the word of God. This disobedience, since it is sin, creates a system too powerful for humankind to escape on their own (Vorster, 2020:4). However, humankind is still responsible for their own individual sin. Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, reflects on this in chapter 3 verse 23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All of humankind has sinned, anyone who claims to have never sinned is a liar (1 John 1:8). Therefore, individually humankind fails to commune with God, due to their distrust for God, which then leads them to sin. Paul reflects on his individual battle with sin (Romans 7:18-23):

For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I do the very thing I

do not want, I am no longer *the one* doing it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner person, but I see a different law in the parts of my body waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin, *the law* which is in my body's parts.

When one understands sin as systematic, it is easier to comprehend the words of Paul, as it can be rationalised that Paul, in his wrestle with sin, is wrestling an oppressive system. But despite his greatest efforts he still finds himself stuck in the same cycles. This sin keeps humankind from realising their shared identity as beings created in the image of God.

Since humans are largely communal, a systematic passing down of sin occurs through different bonds that human beings share throughout their lifetimes. Every individual is born of a man and a woman, inheriting certain biological traits from their parents. The realist position of explaining the original sin, argues that sin is transmitted biologically since all of humanity was present in the loins of Adam (Vorster, 2020:4). A theological dilemma is created by the realist perspective, as it would mean that humanity was guilty of sin by fate, rather than any actions of their own (Vorster, 2020:4). However, understanding that all of humanity is biologically connected to each other through their common ancestor Adam, sin is a system inherited through different bonds. These bonds can be but are not limited to “kinship, social structures and historical chains of events” (Vorster, 2020:4). In chapter 2, identity was identified to be inclusive of one's social identity. Societal bonds are part of our social identities, and these shape how different individuals form their identity.

Since humankind often exist in groups, social identities play a factor in maintaining the system of sin and keeping the sin generational. Beyond the biological aspect of sin, it is the societal aspect of sin which keeps sin reproducing across different generations, within different groups of people<sup>5</sup>. Group identities are often distorted, allowing sin to gain momentum (Vorster, 2020:5). Where distorted group identities prevail, injustice reigns and this maintains the system of sin. David, in 2 Samuel 13, does not judge Amnon for raping Tamar, causing Absalom to take justice in his own hands, which

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<sup>5</sup> The societal aspect of sin is prominent within liberation theology.

eventually leads to Absalom staging a rebellion against his father's kingdom. At the root of Absalom's rebellion, was his anger for David's inability to judge where injustice had occurred against his sister. This is a clear example of how a king's injustice changed the nation of Israel, those who stood with Absalom eventually turning their faces from God. A society can keep a nation in the cycle of sin, through the actions of one member of the group to another. Group identities may sometimes be founded on bad principles, which are embedded in sin. This is because in groups human beings often attains "a false sense of security, an illusionary feeling of power, a perverted sense of direction, and a suppressed sensitivity to personal accountability," (Vorster, 2020:5). Those who formed part of the rebellion against David, the King of Israel, probably felt justified in their doings, not realising that they were standing against the anointed king of Israel.

Sin permeates through all parts of human identity, creating a distortion on the way that human beings see themselves in relation to God. Instead of realising their identity as *imago Dei*, humankind find itself stuck in the inescapable system of sin. Through the sin of Adam and Eve, all of humankind was dragged into the systematic oppression of sin. However, humanity is not guilty because of the sins of Adam and Eve, but rather because of their own sins. In the quest for identity, during the identity formation stage, the system of sin is often a pinnacle part. Humankind is not without hope, however, Christian theology teaches that Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for sin, that righteousness might become attainable to the children of God.

### **3.6 JESUS CHRIST – THE SECOND ADAM**

The narrative of the creation, particularly the creation of humankind, marks the opening of what is known as the Old Testament. The New Testament is marked by the birth of Christ. The apostle Paul refers to Jesus as the last Adam in the first letter to the Corinthians (15:45). In understanding the full expression of the *imago Dei*, one ought to understand Christ, and His role as the last Adam. The Bible clearly notes that through Adam, sin entered the world. 1 John 3:4 defines sin as a transgression of the law. Adam and Eve, humankind's common ancestors were the first to introduce sin to humanity. The apostle Paul states (Romans 8:12):

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned –

Through Adam, all fell, however, through Christ righteousness is achieved. Paul (Romans 8:17) further elaborates on the position of Christ in creation, and the identity of humanity:

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

Through Christ, grace and righteousness are attained by those who believe in Him. John 1 speaks of the beginning of Christ differently from the other three gospels. John (1:1-5) traces the beginning of Jesus all the way back to creation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of humankind. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it.

John informs the reader that not only was Jesus born through a miraculous birth, through the virgin Mary, but He was also there at the very beginning. Jesus is the very Word that God created all things through in the beginning. The communicative characteristic of God is personified in Jesus. Since sin changed humanity's perception of the *imago Dei* from the beginning. Christ plays a unique role in the manifestation of the *imago Dei* within Christian identity.

Migliore notes that in light of the history of Jesus Christ, the Christian faith and Christian theology should understand the *imago Dei* as "an *imago Christi* and an *imago trinitatis*" (2004:141). Often when discussing Jesus and His ministry, the discussion

focuses on Christ's pinnacle role in God's remedy for human sin through the death of Jesus (Grenz, 2004:617). Of course, this is an eminent part of the Gospel, however, the role of Christ is revealed throughout the New Testament to have been more than just that of a Redeemer. The birth of Christ is one that is supernatural, unlike that of any other human being that has existed. Adam was God's first creation, made from the dust of the earth. Christ is God's first-born son born through a woman. When Adam's fathered Seth, the Bible uses quite interesting words to describe the relationship they shared. The author of Genesis (5:3) states:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a *son* in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a *son* in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.

Seth was born according to the likeness of his father, Adam. Likewise, Jesus can be argued to have been born according to the image of God, His father. The realist position on sin being passed down biologically, and all of humanity having taken part in the sin of Adam since all were in the loins of Adam, does not include Christ. This is because Christ does not belong to the loins of Adam, therefore, He does not share the fallen state of Adam. Instead, Christ becomes the image of God, Matthew (1:18) testifies to this:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, like Seth, can be said to be in the likeness and image of His Father, God. Thus, Jesus becomes the new expression of the *imago Dei*. One might argue that therefore Paul referred to Christ as the last Adam, the last man made in the image and likeness of God. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that Christ is indeed the image of God. Just as Adam had been before sin, Jesus was born untainted by the power and system of

sin. He was fully human, in the same way Adam and Eve were – in the perfect image of God (Grenz, 2004:618). Christ became the image of God restored, in His redemption of humankind.

The implications of the crucifixion for identity is significantly stressed by Moltmann and Volf summarises this as solidarity (2019:31). The suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross were not only His own suffering, but also, in solidarity, that of the poor and the weak. The subject of self-giving love is therefore a predominant theme in Christ's identity (Volf, 2019:31-32).

Much of Jesus' ministry was spent living and interacting with the children of Israel. Jesus walked the earth as the image of God, illustrating how life as one who bares the image of God ought to be lived out. Christ informs our understanding of the *imago Dei* because He is the best revelation of who God is. There is much that one can learn about the reality of God through the manifestation of the *imago Dei* by studying the character of Christ (Grenz, 2004:619). Understanding Christ as the *imago Dei* forms an important part of comprehending the notion of forming an identity in Christ<sup>6</sup>.

### **3.7 CHRISTIANS AND THE *IMAGO DEI***

The word Christian is first recorded in Acts 11:26, referring to a body of believers who met together in Antioch of Syria. Prior to this, believers of Christ were simply called believers or apostles (in the case of the disciples of Christ). The Greek word Χριστιανός, translated to Christian in English, is said to be the name given by Gentiles to the worshippers of Jesus (Thayers, 2011). Thus, the name was descriptive, describing who the Gentiles identified the body of believers to be. The early church preached the message of Christ; therefore, the name Christian was born to name believers of Christ. When one makes the decision to be Christian, they are declaring that they are followers of Jesus (Thayers, 2011). Therefore, one who claims that they

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to take note of the fact that Jesus is a part of the triune Godhead. In discussing Him as the image of God, one should not take away from the divinity of Jesus. The book of Hebrews goes into detail about the different identities that Christ has and names Jesus as the son of God greater than the angels (Hebrews 1:1-14); Jesus as a man, made a little lower than the angels (Hebrews 2:5-18); Jesus as God's messenger (Hebrews 3:1); Jesus as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16); and Jesus as the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11-28). These are but a few of the ways in which Christ is depicted throughout Scripture. Jesus is multifaceted. These characteristics of Christ are not ignored or disregarded; they simply are not focused on for this discussion. For the discussion the focus is on Christ as the *imago Dei*.

are Christian ought to be following the ways and teachings of Christ. Christ is the focus of the Christian life.

Kelsey notes that references in the New Testament to Jesus Christ being the *imago Dei* should be prioritised over instances where the phrase is used in the Old Testament (2009:900). In the previous section on the *imago Dei*, humanity as the image of God was discussed. According to this view of Kelsey, however, it would be more fitting to speak of humanity as the image of the image of God (Kelsey 2009:1009).

Since Christ informs our current understanding of the *imago Dei* the study of His life and ministry can inform believers today what it means to be in Christ, as He is in the Father. Throughout His ministry, Jesus concerned Himself with communicating the identity of His followers, particularly His disciples, to them. The recorded prayer of Jesus in John 17, records Jesus praying that God may give the glory given to Jesus to the disciples. Jesus prays that His disciples may be one with Him (Jesus) as He is one with the Father (God) (John 14:23). Jesus seems to have fully understood His identity as the image of God. He understood Himself to be one with God. The theme of being united with God is prevalent throughout the gospels. Jesus' call for the disciples to be one with Him is one that characterises much of the lived experiences of the disciples.

Paul's experiences, often shared through in his doctrines through his letters, reflect an understanding of what a Christian's identity is once they are saved. Echoing the sentiments of Jesus when He was addressing Nicodemus in Matthew 3:1, Paul (Romans 12:2) writes to the church in Rome about their identity saying, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Being a Christian in being born again by the Spirit, and one ought to be transformed by the renewing of the mind. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *this person is* a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). There is an understanding that Paul had concerning the identity of believers that saw a laying down of the old life and taking on a new life, a new identity. Anyone who calls himself a believer, a Christian, has laid aside his old self, and takes on a new self in Christ. Before all of humanity shared in the fall of Adam, and through that humankind was condemned to the systematic cycle of sin. By through Christ humans now bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:49). The new identity that one assumes when they believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is that the

image of Christ. Paul instructs the church of Ephesus in Ephesians 4:24, “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Just as Christ is the image of God, He passes on to humankind the gift to be restored into the true image of God, in their fallen state of Adam, through faith. The joy for the Christian is that this new identity erases the old identity. This new identity is a gift from God, it is of no merit of one’s own that they can be reconciled to the image of God through Christ, instead it is the gift of grace given to humanity by God which reconciles us (Ephesians 2:8). Thus, when one claims to be Christian, they are declaring that they are in the image of Christ – the image of God.

Paul goes a bit further in explain his identity as a Christian, saying:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

It is Christ who enables Paul to live the life that he lives. Therefore, the identity that believers assume does not depend on them, instead it depends on Christ who is the author and finisher of their faith (Hebrews 12:2). It is by looking to Christ that believers get a new identity. The Christian, ought to be rooted in Christ, to understand their new identity in Christ. It is important to understand, follow and meditate on the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, to gain a deeper understanding of the expression of their identity in Christ. Since the image of Adam is passed down from generation to generation, one might assume that the image of Christ is also passed down from generation to generation.

### **3.8 THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

The most prominent recent voice in theological anthropology concerning human identity is that of David Kelsey in his magnum opus, *Eccentric Existence* (2009). Kelsey’s anthropology is decisively theocentric, and, in keeping with the previous section of this chapter, also wholly Christological. He states that the identity of Christ “will be definitive of Christian accounts of God” (2009:961).

Traditional understandings of humanity have focused on the *imago Dei* as an “essential structural feature of human beings that constitutes them as distinctively human and distinguishes them from animals who do not exhibit God’s image” (Kelsey, 2009:895). Kelsey, however, does not make the *imago Dei* the centre of his theological anthropology.

In exploring and understanding the human being, *what* humanity is, *how* humanity should act and behave, *who* humanity is individually and collectively, attention should be given to God’s relation to humanity as Creator, Redeemer, and Reconciler (Jones, 2012:788). Kelsey starts his work by asking the following questions, all related to identity: “*What* are we?”; “*How* ought we be?”; “*Who* am I and who are we?” (2009:1-2, italics in original).

Understanding, primarily comes from understanding God first, and the best way to understand God is through His revealed actions within the Bible. Theological anthropology is born considering understanding God’s creative actions towards humans, and how we ought to react due to this (Jones, 2012:788). It is especially the “claims about how God relates to human beings” (Kelsey, 2009:8) that are immutable in claims about humankind, for Kelsey, and therefore the central question that his work seeks to answer, is:

“*What is implied about human beings by the claim that God actively relates to us to create us, to draw us to eschatological consummation, and to reconcile us when we have become estranged from God?*” (Kelsey, 2009:8, italics in original).

More specifically, he asks: “What is implied about human personhood by the claim that God actively relates to us?” (Kelsey, 2009:46). In bids to explain the relation to between humanity and God, Kelsey theorises that there are three plotlines within the Bible that are impossible to be made smaller, namely the creation, consummation, and the reconciliation (20099; cf. Ford, 2010:44). These three macro plotlines, independently encompass different micro narratives and themes throughout Scripture.

### 3.8.1 Creative Power of God

Creation is the common starting place in understanding the creative power of God, particularly where humanity is concerned. However, unlike most, Kelsey chooses to draw from the wisdom texts, Proverbs, Job, and other such literature to highlight the magnificence of God's creative power (2009; cf. Jones, 2012:790). Where most focus on the attention God puts into creation, and the uniqueness of the creation of humanity, Kelsey pays attention to generosity of God in creation (2009:163, 175). God owed it to no one to create. In creating all creatures, particularly humanity, He does so generously and lovingly, out of His own. Interestingly, after He creates, He reflects in delight, valuing the creation that He has made, calling it 'good'. It is God's generosity that gives life to all of creation. God values His creation and frees humanity, particularly, to respond to Him appropriately of their own accord (Jones, 2012:790). The grandeur of creation no longer focuses on who humanity is, but rather on who God is. Thus, rendering humanity the status of a created creature.

Kelsey draws from the wisdom texts how the human life, reflects the creative power of God (2009; cf. Jones, 2012:790). Humans as mere objects of creation, nothing to be fawned over without the actual consideration of the Creator who made them. Wisdom texts often highlight the general, 'everydayness' of humanity, particularly in relation to the rest of creation (Kelsey, 2009:191). The limitations of human beings, an indication of the simplicity of humanity, in contrast with the grandeur of God. Jones (2012:790) emphasises Kelsey's view that the real human is simply the everyday expression of humanity. Thus, to be human, is simply to be in a living human body, at a particular point in time and space, whose quality of being is assured by the Creator (Jones, 2012:790). Since humanity is but a creature in creation, the knowledge of humanity, is simply nothing in comparison to the knowledge and mystery of God, the Creator. Human life should therefore be a free-willed expression of loyalty towards God (Jones, 2012:790). One of Kelsey's notable claims is that humans always reflect the glory of God in one way or another, since the image of God is humanity's "basic unsubstitutable identity" (2009:357-401). Unfortunately, humanity does not always recognise the glory of God in themselves or others, due to the fallen nature of humanity.

Furthermore, Kelsey stresses the trinitarian nature of creation, indicating the generation and love of the Father (2009:123), the reciprocal relationship with the Son

and the sustaining power of the Spirit (2009:125). The context of God's creative power is what Kelsey describes as "living on borrowed breath" (2009:159).

### **3.8.2 Eschatological Consummation**

God gives a warning to Adam in Genesis 2:17:

but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will certainly die.

This warning forms the basis of the focus of Kelsey's macro narrative. The eschatology of humanity has been a looming effect of sin, the rebellious act of Adam and Eve. However, God's eschatological consummation is the macro narrative of focus (Jones, 2012:791). Beyond the blessing of creation, God blesses humanity by providing an escape from the second through His Son, Jesus (Jones, 2012:791). After the fall, humans had to find new ways to relate to God and attempted to come up with ways to save themselves from the eminence of death. Unfortunately, as those building the tower of Babel came to realise, one cannot save oneself (Genesis 11:4-9). Hence, Kelsey theorises that man lives on borrowed time (2009; cf. Jones, 2012:791). All of humanity lives with the reality that they are going to die someday. However, the Bible concerns itself with communicating that death too shall be no more in the future. Jesus in defeating death, fulfils this hope for eschatological consummation (Jones, 2012:791). Humans have the joyful hope that death has been defeated in the next life through Christ.

The Spirit defines the ultimate context of created life, being the "lord of the time of the eschaton" (Kelsey, 2009:446). The Spirit is sent by the Father with the Son and within this manner of relations, all created being that God related to, human beings included, lives on borrowed time. The presence of the Spirit is "thoroughly eschatological" (Kelsey, 2009:443).

The proper response to this is a response that anticipates "the full actualization of an eschatological blessing already actually inaugurated now, involving radically transformed creaturely life in transformed proximate contexts, lived in community that

participates in the triune God's own life and is marked by righteousness, peace and joy" (Kelsey, 2009:510). God's eschatological consummation and reconciliation are related, and both "are concretely enacted in the selfsame story about Jesus" (Kelsey, 2009:122).

### **3.8.3 Reconciliation**

Sin creates a separation between humanity and God. The final macro narrative focuses on the reconciliation of God and man through Jesus Christ (2009; cf. Ford, 2010:44). The theme of the reconciliation of humanity to God forms a major basis of the Bible. This reconciliation becomes the third lens through which human existence is understood (Jones, 2012:792). Through the sinless life of Christ, an example of living by the power of the Holy Spirit is given. Thus, establishing a basis for sin to be overthrown (Jones, 2012:792). Kelsey notes how in Christ, God overturns sin; Christ "takes on the consequences of the deadly dynamic that most basically structures humankind's proximate contexts ... in all of their ontological and moral ambiguities" (Kelsey, 2009:647) in obedience to the Father and in the power of the Spirit.

It is through the death of the spotless Lamb, Christ, that the power of sin is ultimately defeated. God, through sacrificing Christ overthrows sin (Jones, 2012:792). Accordingly, Kelsey refers to this third plotline as "living by another's death". The death and resurrection of Christ, symbolise the reconciliation of humanity to God. Jesus becomes the object of reflection in understanding who humanity is. The way in which humans ought to respond to this gift of salvation, is by living in faith and hope (Jones, 2012:792). Humanity ought to live at harmony with one another, seeking to reveal the harmonious relational aspect of the nature of man. The Sermon on the Mount forms a good template in understanding how humanity ought to relate to each other and God, through the reconciling power of God.

Kelsey also notes that it is the triune God that reconciles estranged human beings to Himself (2009:128) and that this reconciliation "empowers a deep and enlivening transformation of human creature in community" (Kelsey, 2009:129). Because of reconciliation, the ultimate context of humanity can be described as one of love and grace, given that "the triune God's love for estranged humankind" is concretely enacted in the person of Jesus Christ and God shares with humanity "the relationship

the Son has with the Father in the power of the Spirit” (Kelsey, 2009:624). In terms of identity, the answer to the third question that Kelsey asks, who we are, is answered by the confession: “As those who are ‘in Christ’, we have our identities in Christ’s identity” (2009:695).

### **3.9 CONCLUSION**

The *imago Dei* informs an understanding of who God formed humanity to be. The creation of Adam and Eve is centred around the notion that they were created in the image of God. From the moment Adam and Eve were conceived within the mind of God, they were meant and created to be the image of God. They were to be earthly representatives of God in heaven. The identity of Adam and Eve in being the image of God, supersedes their role and function as rulers of the earth. God needs to be understood as more than just a ruler because reducing Him only to that role and function takes away from all His other characteristics. God is introduced to the reader as a God who brings order to chaos. The first chapter of Genesis reveals that God is a Creator and a Communicator. As one reads further in the Bible, they will realise that God is more than just those three roles and functions. In revealing His own identity to Moses, God does not characterise Himself. He simply answers that He is. The implication that God is the very essence of being. Since God does not characterise Himself or give Himself a specific role or function in identifying Himself. Thus, when Adam and Eve are created, their identity does not refer to them simply being rulers. Instead, rulership is only one of the roles assigned to humankind.

All of humanity finds their identity in Adam and Eve. If the genealogy of all humanity was written in records, one would be able to trace every single human being back to Adam and Eve. What makes humans unique is their humanity – the very essence of being human. In the creation of humanity, God establishes the being of human to be interconnected with all life, by making humans from the dust of the earth. The fall of humanity altered humanity’s identity formation. It is not the identity of Adam and Eve that was changed, but rather their understanding of their identity as the image of God. Disobedience to the commandments of God created an insecurity in the identity of humankind, which keeps humanity in the system of sin. Wrestling with sin can seem rather daunting as one can never seem to make it out of it. Sin is a system which is

deeply entrenched in who humanity is that it becomes inescapable. This creates an identity crisis since God and sin cannot co-exist. Jesus is identified in Scripture as the second Adam. As the only conceived Son of God, He is the image of God. Christians are those who choose to follow Christ. They are identified in Scripture as the image of Christ, thus the image of God. Kelsey's work in understanding humanity from a theological point of view understands humanity to be encompassed in three macro narratives in the Bible – the creation, the eschatological consummation, and the reconciliation. In forming an identity in Christ, believers are reconciling with their identity as the *imago Dei*.

## Chapter 4

### Christian Identity Formation

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a natural stage of development that all individuals go through, particularly during their adolescence and young adult years. It has already been established that during this stage the individual aims to reach a state of continuity and uniformity in the way they view themselves. This period of dealing with the identity crisis leads in most cases to stable and solid identity formation. Teenagers navigate through identity using the context they have been exposed to. In other words, navigating through identity relies largely on the social environment one is exposed to. Proverbs 22:6 states: “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he grows older, he will not abandon it.” The implication is that the teachings that parents and other influential figures expose their children to at a young age, shape who they become when they are older. Identity formation within the Christian community relies on one’s personal walk with Christ. The understanding that one holds of Christ as the *imago Dei* and the role that this plays in the believer’s life will form the foundation of one’s understanding of their own identity. Since the finished work of Christ on the cross, offers humanity restoration and future victory over death, Kelsey theorises that the human response to this ought to be love (2009; cf. Jones, 2012:792). John 3:16 shares that God’s love for the world caused Him to give His only begotten Son, that all who believe in Christ will not perish but inherit everlasting life. God’s love is a major theme within Scripture, and the notion that humans ought to love Him is not new. When asked which of the commandments was the greatest in the law, Jesus responds (Matthew 22:37-40):

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets.”

According to this statement, love should be at the root of all Christian conduct. Thus, children raised in households where love for God, themselves and their neighbours was emphasised were raised to follow Christ. However, through the reading of the book of Acts, as well as experiencing the church today, it becomes clear that not all those who are Christians were raised within Christian households. In the book of Acts, the Gospel message of Christ goes beyond the Jews, and it is shared to the Gentiles, who were raised differently to the Jews. Today there are Christians, like me, who were raised in households that did not necessarily practice Christianity but became chose Christ for themselves. In the same way, some Children who were raised in Christian households denounce the faith as they grow older. Studies have yet to be done to study the age of conversion within the Christian community particularly in South Africa. These had the influence of their earlier cultures and upbringing in the foundational years of their lives, which influence how identity formation takes place. If the Bible teaches that teaching the child in the ways of the Lord when they are young, to ensure that they do not turn from it when they are older, then surely the effect of worldly teaching when a child is young, has bearing on the identity formation of an individual.

The navigation of identity within those individuals, who like the Gentiles, are uncircumcised I the ways of the Lord, might prove to be somewhat challenging. This chapter will explore identity formation within the Christian community. Firstly, identity formation within the church will be discussed. The influence of Western thought on Christianity will be very briefly discussed. Since identity formation is largely cognitive, it not measurable. Therefore, the only way one can know the process of identity formation for another is through narration. Narrative theology will be discussed as a form of theology. Lastly, my own personal identity formation will be explored, as I reflect on how I navigated through my own identity crisis and established an identity in Christ. The study seeks to investigate narratives shared by those who are Christ and seek to understand how their identity in Christ formed and expresses itself in view of their pre-existing identities, through the narration of their own personal experiences.

## **4.2. THE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY FORMATION**

### **4.2.1 The Early Church and Identity Formation**

The Gospels, The Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles share the narratives of Christ and the spreading of the Gospel. Christianity develops within a Jewish society, in the midst of the Jewish religious system of Israel under the rule of the Roman Empire. Christianity is born at the midpoint of the thousand years Graeco-Roman Civilization (Tarnas, 2010:94). The Romans were the main political powers of the day, heavily influenced by Greek civilization, which was absorbed into the Roman empire during its conquests. Because of the influence of intellectual inheritance of the Greek empire, the international language of the day was Greek (Wenham & Walton, 2001:7). The books of the New Testament are testimonies of the life, death, resurrection, and impact of Christ on the Judeo-Greco-Roman world. Carter (2000:8) contends that the Gospel of Matthew is a narrative on the identity formation of the followers of Christ. The contents of the Gospel are not set in opposition to existing Scripture, known to the Judeo community, but rather it builds on the foreknowledge that the community had.

Thus, relying heavily on the pre-existing Jewish identity of the audience that would read the Gospel (Carter, 2000:8). This new identity that is presented in the book of Matthew is dependent on an understanding of the old identity. The gospel creates a distinct identity for the believers of Jesus Christ within an existing identity built on Jewish traditions and customs (Baker, 2011:228). The Old Testament records the formation of the Jewish nation, from Abraham to the exile. The New Testament is a recollection of the events which took place after the birth of Christ the Messiah, written for a specific audience. The author of the Gospel of Luke opens the Gospel by addressing Theophilus (Luke 1:3) as the intended reader. Thus, much of the New Testament Scriptures were not necessarily written with the intention of becoming Scripture, but rather with the purpose of sharing the gospel message of Christ. Therefore, it is through the narratives that one comes to understand the identity formation of the first church. These narratives are largely shaped by the political climate of the day, as politics influences the identity of the everyday people.

Believers of Christ, a small group of fervent Judaic disciples, held the notion that the man Jesus, crucified by the Roman government, at the behest of the Jews, had resurrected from the dead giving them a message to proclaim to the rest of the world.

It is the faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ which leads to the birth of a new religion, thus the birth of a new identity (Tarnas, 2010:94). Lieu (1998: 71-82) presents several approaches used within scholarly literature to characterise the identity formation of the first church. Scholarly texts concern themselves with the observable identity formation of the early church communities (Lieu, 1998:71). Since Christianity did not develop in isolation, or segregation, those around the community, were able to observe it form and take shape. In fact, it is the observing community that gave this body of believers a name in Acts 11. The label Christian was an identity given to those who taught people about Christ (Acts 11:25). Christianity in the first century is classified mainly by the disciples who were teaching the gospel, the perceived identity being more of a school (Lieu, 1998:72).

This is more thoroughly observed when contemplating the fundamental purpose of the writing of the Gospels, the Acts of the apostles, and the epistles; the goal of each is to teach. Paul noted the inspiration and purpose of scripture in his second letter to Timothy (3:16-17):

All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work.

This statement encompasses the observable identity of Christians in its infancy. Those who were referred to as Christians were they that taught the nations, rebuking, correcting the world for righteousness. Their actions characterised their observed identity. However, more can be understood about the perceived identity formation of the Christian community.

The Christian identity formation is largely characterised by their separation from Judaism (Lieu, 1998:72). Christianity is a product of Judaism, yet the identity formation of the group seems to lie in creating distance and conflict between itself and Judaism (Lieu, 1998:72). The first Christians, including Christ, Himself, were Jews, brought up within Judaic traditions. Judaic traditions, folklore, and identity narratives are fundamental to the Christian worldview. Christians claim to be the true heirs of the promises of God given through the patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel

(Lieu, 1998:72). Promises that first belonged to those who were born into the lineage of Israel, and inherited through birth right, suddenly became hijacked from the Judaic tradition, and claimed by the followers of Christ. The relationship tension created by the formation of Christianity can be viewed as an identity formed from the painful separation from a parent (Judaism) (Lieu, 1998:72). The Gospel of Matthew has been argued to best represent this conflict. A sociological study of the book reveals that the author creates this conflict, making stark contrasts between Christ, the Pharisees and the scribes, to create in-group identification (Cromhout, 2009:5). This means for Christianity to break away from Judaism, in-group and out-group dynamics are established. Those who affiliate with Christ, and identify Him as the promised Messiah, are a part of the group and are identified to be the inheritors of the promises of God. However, the Jews who refused to recognise Christ as the Messiah are othered, vilified and some might argue misrepresented in the book of Matthew (Cromhout, 2009:5). A social identity is thus created from this perspective. Social characterisation takes place when one group defines their identity in relation to others (Cromhout, 2009:5). Early Christian identity formation created their social identity by setting themselves apart from the social group they were once a part of. Though the Christian church used Hebrew scriptures and theology for the foundational teachings of the faith, the faith set itself apart from Judaic traditions by noting and highlighting the hypocrisy of the pharisees. The creation of this identity seems to centre around the idea that the promises of God are not limited to the ethnicity of an individual. There is greater emphasis obedience through love for Christ. This becomes what essentially sets the Jew and the Christian apart.

Christianity did not only set itself apart from Judaism, but it also isolates itself from the rest of the world. John (15:19) records Jesus informing the disciples about their fate as His followers:

If you were of the world, the world would love *you* as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

This identifies the disciples and followers of Christ as those who are hated by the world. The formation of the internal self-identity of first century Christians, was the understanding that they were set apart from the rest of the world (Lieu, 1998:75). The notion of being set apart is more an internal expression of identity, than it is an observable characteristic. The physical appearance of the Christian was no different than the Jew or the Gentile. For these Christians, their identity had to do with their citizenship. Existing in Graeco-Roman cities, they regarded themselves as sojourners, foreigners on this earth, though they lived in their native lands (Lieu, 1998:76). The believers were therefore not to be surprised when hated for not adhering to social norms in bids to obey Christ. Much of the first four centuries saw Christians being persecuted for their efforts to establish this new religious system, in a world with existing systems (Tarnas, 2010:94). Christianity set itself apart as it did not rely on ethnicity, but rather on faith. Where ethnicity was once used to exclude and include people in salvation for the Jews – ethnicity was used as grounds to be heard by Caesar, as revealed in the case of Paul, in the last chapters of the book of Acts. Ethnicity for the Christian group meant nothing if one did not have believe the message of Jesus.

However, the notion of being strangers in the land of their fathers is also contrasted in the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:16-20:

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated to them. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The disciples of Jesus, therefore, though foreigners in their own land, consider themselves natives of foreign lands (Lieu, 1998:76). The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles are records of the apostles journeying through different lands preaching the message of Christ. The identity formation of Christians included their conquests

through the world proclaiming the gospel, thus laying ownership and claim over foreign lands and the salvation of foreign people. These are only but a few factors which characterised the identity formation of the first century Christians. Through the preaching of the gospel, the persecution of Christians subsided by the end of the fourth century at the conversion of Constantine from pagan to Christian (Tarnas, 2010:94). The conversion of such a prominent historical figure transformed the identity of the Christian community. No longer were Christians the minority group being persecuted for standing against the Roman government. Instead, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (Tarnas, 2010:94). What was once pagan Rome, became Christian Rome – the Roman Catholic church. Traces of pagan Rome can still be found within much of Roman Catholic and Christian practices today.

#### **4.2.2. Western Civilization on Christian Identity**

The fall of the Roman Empire was ushered in by the defeat of the fifth Emperor in the West (Tarnas, 2010:95). Naturally, the Germanic people who overtook the Empire could not rid the influence of the Graeco-Roman influence, neither the religion that the people had adopted. Thus, from the foundation of the formation of this new civilization was characterised by the combined influence of the Germanic people and the Roman Catholic church (Tarnas, 2010:95). The Christian community had become a universal church, influenced by Graeco-Rome and Germanic thought and culture. A combination of all these philosophies, ideologies, rituals, mythology, etc., became what is currently understood as Western ideology. The Western world was influenced by the Church for hundreds of years as the church was the centre for knowledge and knowledge production. It is during this epoch that the Reformation sparked by Martin Luther's ninety-five thesis birthed the Reformation, giving birth to the Reformed tradition and the Protestant churches.

During the formation of the Protestant churches, Western civilization, began a conquest to find new lands, and convert the people to their ideologies and philosophies, including Christianity. That is how Christianity, an Eastern religion system, came to be known and experienced as a Western religion. Much research has been done concerning the weaponizing of the Bible in the colonising of nations during the spread of Western civilization.

The disciples were the first Christians; thus, they had the privilege of laying the foundation for the church as we experience it today. About 2022 years after the first body of believers were characterised as Christians, Christianity is one of the major world religions. In an interconnected global society, Christianity, a religion highly influenced by Western thought, continues to shape the identity of many. Today, social media has become one of the driving forces through which Christianity is spread and shared to people all over the world. A young woman in South Africa, can easily be friends with a Christian Nigerian woman, having never met in person but they actively build each other's faith. This said, one expects that the process of identity formation for the modern church is very different from the identity formation of the first century church. In modern Christianity, the conflict created between Judaism and Christianity is no longer as strife as it was. However, this does not mean that believers are not identified by the conflict created within the nations it has spread to. Where the first church contended with the Graeco-Roman world, the modern church interacts with all the cultures Christianity has since spread to. However, the influence of Western ideologies on Christianity has shaped much of what is understood as Christianity today. This influence is not minor, neither can Christian identity always be established without the influence of the West. Though the influence of Western thought on the reluctance of many young people to join Christianity is not discussed in this study, it is important to note that much of Christianity is rejected because of the influence of Western thought.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4.3. NARRATIVE THEOLOGY**

Identity formation is not a measurable construct. It is largely abstract and takes place cognitively within different individuals and social groups. The expression of identity may be observable, especially in social groups that share the same identity. However, it is necessarily measurable, and the construction of identity whether social or personal is best understood through the shared experience. Narrative theology, a new stream of theology developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, is the ideal tool that

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<sup>7</sup> There is much research and a decisive movement by Black theologians to offer a different view of Christianity that is less steeped in Western civilization, often grounded in identity. Within the South African theological landscape, these theologians include, but are not limited to, Tinyiko Maluleke, the late Vuyani Vellem, and Kelebogile Resane.

one can use in understanding the process of Christian identity formation (Stech, 2019:421). This approach of theology would be the best brunch to explore identity formation. Narrative theology effectively asserts that individual stories are fundamental to the understanding of theology (Stech, 2019:421). Most of the Bible is the written narrative of the lived experiences of different individuals, from Adam to John.

Although stories form a great part of the genres in Scripture, the importance of viewing Biblical stories as narrative was often neglected, the focus mainly put on extracting certain truths and principles from the text (Stech, 2019:422). Neglecting to consider the actual story within which certain principles are drawn from, leaves room for hermeneutical error, as the story provides much context for the establishment of certain truths. It was the contributions of the likes of H. Richard Niebuhr which led to understanding the importance of “life-stories and narrativity” in theological thought (Stech, 2019:422). Storytelling is a large part of how humans communicate with each other and share their experiences. The stories that people tell about themselves are not reduced to mere capsules of lessons and principles one can learn. Instead, when listening to one’s story, the listener extracts all kinds of information which leads to an understanding of who the person telling the story is, and how they experience the different people they talk about throughout their story. The same can be said about the Bible. The Bible does not only communicate the general truths of God and humanity (Stech, 2019:422). The story form is not simply used to illustrate meaning, but rather it is the tool used to bring about meaning (Stech, 2019:422). Therefore, the story is just as important as the meaning. Narrative theology concerns itself with the human experience. Simply put, narrative theology can be defined as the confluence of humanity and divine revelation (Stech, 2019:423). Through narrative theology the revelation of God is understood considering man’s narrative.

Narrative theology views the narratives of human beings as theology (Stech, 2019:424). Since theology is the study of God, this means that through understanding human narratives, one comes to understand both man and God. Through humanity’s biographies, the individual stories are situated within the larger faith narrative (Stech, 2019:424). The individual stories of different individuals fit into the grand story of humanity and God. There are three stories that are equally involved in theology – the story of the giver of life, God; the story of human beings, stories alive; the story of the world where life is happening (Stech, 2019:424). The three stories are interlinked

through the human story, humans bring the stories alive by telling their narratives. This is because humans, Christians in particular, cannot separate God and the world from their story.

When studying identity, narrative becomes an important theological tool, as it is the revelation used to reveal identity (Stech, 2019:423). Identity formation and the expression of identity is mainly shared through narratives. It is only through biographies, autobiographies, documentaries, reality shows, etc. that people truly get to express their identities. The Bible is a series of stories starting with the concept of God, without offering any explanation for who this character is, the author merely conceptualises for the reader that there is a God. What follows the conceptualisation of God in the opening line of Genesis, is the creation story (Ford, 2018: 537). The recorded narrative of creation is an interaction between God and the world, through the hands of human beings. Humanity is a tool which God uses to communicate His story (Stech, 2019:424). The Biblical narrative is followed by “sin and evil, providence, redemption, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology” (Fords, 2018:537). Through narrative theology, these broad themes are explored through the lives of different individuals and communities. The identity of humanity is clearly a large part of the narrative, as God purposefully gives them identity as the *imago Dei* and as custodians of the earth. Throughout the Bible, God reveals not only Himself, but the identity of the individuals He interacts with. Likewise, as humans interact with the world, they name it and give different elements of life an identity. It becomes interesting when humans, through their interactions with God, name and attempt to identify God. It is through the experiences that humanity has with other humans, nature, and God, that identity was formed. The Bible is a collection of individual narratives about how people experienced God and how their experiences with God shaped their identity.

In understanding the *imago Dei*, humans are a necessary tool that God will use to express His identity and the identity of humanity. Consider how everything known of Christ by the modern believers was constructed by the first century believers. Their written observations and narrative on who Christ is, and the restored image of God in humanity, is the basis upon which believers today can map out an identity for themselves. Therefore, since the narratives of old were so important in forming the Christian identity, it is important that these principles of mapping one’s identity is not

abandoned. Believers ought to continue to tell their stories, particularly stories of identity formation as it relates the God, being in the image of God.

#### **4.4. PERSONAL IDENTITY FORMATION JOURNEY.**

Since identity formation is explored through narrative experiences, one can share their personal journeys with God, to communicate their own process of identity formation. My name is Nonhlanhla Mazibuko. Admittedly, when people ask me who I am, it is the first thing I tell them, because that is how my identity has been shaped from birth. I was not born into a Christian household, though my parents would probably argue differently. The first time I ever heard the word Christian was in grade two, in class while my teacher, Mrs. Boyce, was conducting the annual demographic survey. I could confidently answer all the questions asked, until she asked what religion we belonged to. But since most of my classmates lifted their hands for Christian, I did the same. Having no idea what this meant, I identified as Christian on paper. I later went home and asked my mother about it, and she assured me that I was definitely a Christian because she had taught me how to pray. As all eight-year-olds do, I took my mum's word for it, shrugged my shoulders, and went out to play. It wasn't until grade seven, when I really wanted to get the DUX student award that I truly put the principle of prayer to proper practice. Before then, prayer had been a generic process that I fulfilled because my mum told me to do so. But in grade seven, I prayed for the first time because I wanted something from God. Needless to say, I was very disillusioned when I found out that one needs to actually work hard throughout the year to get the award, you don't just pray for it.

Up until this point I had no real knowledge of God, or how God worked. I was simply living my life as a regular Zulu native, raised in the shacks of Rietvallei Extension two in the Westrand. It wasn't until my parents moved us to Sebokeng, enrolled me in a Christian High School, that I began to know about God, through Scripture. This was a very interesting experience; I went from no church at all, to devotions every morning, assembly on Friday, praying during every break time, and talking about God all the time. If I am being quite honest, at first it was a mask, a classic case of when in Rome, do what the Romans do. I was thirteen, new to a school where everyone seemed to know everyone, an introvert who struggled to make friends. The last thing I needed

was to stand out for not believing what everyone else believed. I don't think it was ever debatable, I simply started to believe because of peer-pressure. Interesting things proceeded to happen that year. In May of 2011 I was suspended from school because my parents could not pay school fees. I was a girl raised in a cozy little shack, moved to Sebokeng, in her grandmother's two-bedroom house. The second of four kids, going to a private school. I wore a classic red t-shirt and the same torn tekkies to school every Wednesday for sports. I was surrounded by children from rich families. Teenagers who did not know what it felt like to have only one pair of shoes. Teenagers who did not have to filter themselves before asking their parents for money to buy the school sport's t-shirt because they already owned five. I was the odd one out. That was my identity for the longest time, the poor new girl. Imagine the embarrassment I felt when I was suspended because my parents could not afford to pay the fees. If there was ever a time when I felt like an outsider, it was at this very moment. The reality of my background soon became my identity.

This was the turning point of my faith. I had no one to turn to but God. Again, with the faith I had just a few months before, I prayed that God would help me. I was sitting at home, my mother very zealous in her prayers day and night, out of school while others got to go every day. I was not even hoping to go back to 3 Rivers Christian Academy, the Christian school I attended. All I was praying for was for God to give me a school, and I promised I would give my life over to Him. About a day later, my dad came home with the news that 3 Rivers Christian Academy had offered me a full bursary after seeing how dedicated I was to my schoolwork. I believe it was at this moment that I first knew that God answers prayers. I was still the poor girl with the same pair of torn tekkies, but I was also the girl who prayed to God and promised to give my life to Him. And I did. When I went back to school, I had a completely changed attitude. I wanted to know this God that answered the prayers of a poor girl like me. And know Him I did. Throughout my high school career, I attended every Bible studies class that was available to me. I learnt to know God as a God who hears, and a God who provides. Today I understand my experience of God to be similar to that of Hagar, Sarah's maid servant who bore Ishamael. When Hagar has an encounter with God she too named Him, "Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees me"; for she said, "Have I even seen *Him* here *and lived* after He saw me?" (Genesis 16:13).

At the time I had no idea that my own experience with God, was an experience that a figure in the Bible had. With the knowledge that I have today, I am able to look back and realise that my real-life experience of God, largely shaped my theology and who I consider God to be. These experiences are backed up by Scripture. My experience of God as Provider was also not new. Genesis 22:14 records, “And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” My understanding of God though shaped by my own personal experiences with God, is concurrent with the Biblical revelation of who God is in the life of His children.

By the time I was in grade ten, I understood that I was loved by God, and truly favoured, for I had seen the hand of God over my life. While my poverty still characterised much of my life, it was not the only identity I bore. I was a Christian, a child of God, and this was a significant part of my identity. However, while my identity in Christ was forming and being solidified through my experiences of who He is, and who Scripture reveals Him to be at school, I was struggling to do the same at home. Looking back, I would argue that I probably developed two separate personalities. One at school, where I loved God and studied all these good things about Him, and another one, where I was my parents’ child and had to abide by their rules. When we were taught at school that ancestral worship was bad and told to condemn it, I understood fundamentally what they meant, and I supported the teaching since it was based on Scripture. However, when mum and dad would have rituals, I had no choice but to partake. For the longest time I would try to fight against it, for the sake of consolidating my faith with my lived reality. But there is only so much freedom a teenage girl has in her father’s house. At school I would shun ancestral worship, but at home I would travel with my parents to consult with different sangomas. This was my lived reality. And so, I began to identify as a hypocrite. For I knew what the right thing was to do, but I did not do it.

I have noticed that in many Christian spaces it is easier to identify believers as sinners, than anything else. This is the identity that many find themselves embodying for much of their Christian life. My love and devotion for God continued to grow, despite how guilty I felt. That is how I ended up coming to North-West university to study a Bachelor of Arts degree in Pastoral Guidance and Psychology. I loved the idea of studying about people and God at the same time. However, it was also here that much of my theology was questioned. Throughout my Christian career I had been in White Evangelical

spaces. I had always experienced Christ from a Western perspective, thus I never had to confront the realities of the atrocities of the church against black people. It was at this point that I realised that I was a black woman, shaped by Western ideologies. Much of my identity had been built on self-hatred, and I did not even realise it. One of the ways that this was evident was in the way that I treated my name. I hated my name, Nonhlanhla. Because my parents had taught me that my name meant Mother of Luck. In High School I had learnt that luck was from the 'devil' and Christians did not believe in luck. I remember shouting fighting tooth and nail with my parents about how I was going to change my name when I turned eighteen, because it did not bring glory to God. I remember crying out to God in prayer, asking Him to rename me the way He had renamed Jacob to Israel. But I heard nothing, and I remained Nonhlanhla. This internalised hatred was greatly challenged when I arrived at university. For the first time I was in a space where black thoughts and theology could influence me. Prior to university, I am embarrassed to admit, I did not think that black men could be Christians. I had never experienced black men as influential Christians, who according to 'my standard' were Godly and serious about their walk with Christ. Most times they reminded me of my parents who claimed to be Christians but still consulted the dead. Therefore, my worldview was greatly challenged when I was suddenly surrounded by black men who were serious about their walk with God. I must admit I grew more in my understanding of myself as a black woman walking with God, in this epoch of my life.

Through my study of history and my interaction with politically active students, I was confronted by the injustices of the church towards the people of Africa. Understanding that above everything else, when I enter a room the first thing a person sees about me, is the fact that I am black, this disrupted my theology. For how could I serve a God, who listens to the prayers of the people who hated my people? I believe this characterised the greatest identity crisis of my identity formation. The negotiation of identity, not against the world, but between two parts of myself that defined me, my Africa roots as well as my faith. The two seemed to be at logger heads. Although socially I identified as a Christian, I did not know who I truly was personally. It was through this that I learnt that God is a God who teaches, for He taught me. Often when faced with identity confusion, it is to negotiate clarity. Understanding that all that is African is not evil was one of the major lessons God had to teach me. Through

interactions with people and studying the African worldview, I discovered the true meaning of my name. The African worldview is often thought of as wholistic, everything is connected in one way or another. Thus, for Africans there is no such thing as luck, for nothing ever happens by chance. The African worldview contends that everything that happens is a result or consequence of somethings else. Luck as Western philosophy believes it, does not exist in the African worldview. In the Bantu African worldview, where Nonhlanhla is derived from, Nhlanhla, often loosely translated to the English luck, means favoured. In the African worldview, luck equates favour from the Highest power, God. Therefore, my name, Nonhlanhla, means Mother of those favoured by God. That simple revelation changed not only how I saw myself, but how I saw and experienced African people as a collective. I began to realise that the African worldview is very similar to the Biblical worldview. I began to realise that Africans were not merely sinners, but they too were God's chosen people. This shift in perspective helped me clarify one of the greatest conflicts of my identity crisis.

Today I can say, I am a Christian, a black South African Christian woman, who walks with God. I understand God through my own narrative experience as a God who sees and hears me, a God who provides and a God who teaches. There are of course many other ways I have experienced God, however, due to the limitations of this study, there is not enough room for me to detail all that God has done for me and revealed Himself to be. I understand that fundamentally, I am a child of God, saved by grace from the clutches of sin. Therefore, no, I am not a sinner, I am a righteous woman, who falls from time to time, but in Christ I get up again.

#### **4.5. CONCLUSION**

All human beings go through the process of identity formation as a natural part of the developmental process. This stage takes place during one's adolescence and young adult years. An identity crisis is developed as one tries to consolidate who their parents have raised them to be, and who they believe themselves to be. This crisis is solved through the process of identity formation. The Bible gives parents clear instructions that they ought to train up their children in the ways of God, such that when they are older, they do not depart from His ways. It is therefore the Christian parents' responsibility to provide their children with the necessary tools to forge an identity in

Christ. The *imago Dei*, expressed in the life of Christ is a pinnacle part of the Christian identity. However, this is largely influenced by one's understanding of the Christ. Churches play a pinnacle role in ensuring that people have a good understanding of who Christ is. The Christian Identity formation is influenced by the notions that an individual holds about what it means to be Christian. This chapter explored identity formation within the Christian community from a narrative theology standpoint. The development of the Christian church identity formation influences the church today. Therefore, the development of the early church and the identity formation of this church was discussed. It was noted that the first century church developed within a Judaic Graeco-Roman context. Much of what is Christianity today was shaped by the cultures of that epoch. However, Christianity sought to set itself apart from this society and those who lived within it. They identified as sojourners of this land, their citizenship being in heaven and not here on earth. They spread Christianity rapidly since they collectively identified more like a school, teaching people about the message of Christ everywhere they went. Although they were sojourners, they understood the entire world to belong to the Lord, therefore every land was understood as their own native land. The spread of their influence reached the Roman Emperor Constantine and that changed the identity of Christianity dramatically. No longer was Christianity the religion of the minority, it became the religion of the known world. Much of Western thought was influenced by the Bible, and this influence carried through as the Bible and the gospel message was spread to the rest of the world through colonisation. Narrative theology is the best way that individuals can document their identity formation. Identity is not a measurable construct; one might be going through an identity crisis while maintaining some rituals used to characterise Christians. Thus, the best way that one can find out how identity formation takes place is through told individual experiences. Narrative theology asserts that much of theology is experienced through Biblical stories. The argument therefore is that the stories should not merely be used to extract biblical principles, but rather the stories themselves should form a part of the formation of these principles. Much of Christian identity is experienced through personal narrative stories which reflect the interactions of God, man and the world. I also shared my own personal narrative experience, how I became Christian, and how I developed an identity in Christ throughout my identity formation years.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and recommendations

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will be providing an understanding of an identity in Christ from a theological anthropological perspective. Understanding the context for the development of one's identity has been paramount to the study on identity in Christ. Psycho-political theories have theorised that identity is both a personal and social construct. Religion is perceived to be part of the identity that one assumes, much like all other constructs of their identity. From the inception of Christianity, it was developed within an existing identity system, Judaism, which was based largely on one's ethnicity. Christianity, unlike the Judaea-Graeco-Roman worldview it found itself developing within, did not seek to create a system of exclusivity due to birth right (Carter, 2000:8). It is rather faith in the Lord Jesus, that saves. Since ethnicity is not a barrier which one needs to cross in order to get saved, the gospel is carried to people of all nations. Jesus gave His disciples the following instructions in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Since the gospel message of Christ is a message that Christ intended for all of the world to receive, there would always be issues of identity confusion. This same confusion is characterised within the Bible, as Christianity seeks to set itself apart from the existing cultural identities that the people with was born to belonged to. In the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded in John 3, Jesus mentions to Nicodemus that to see the Kingdom of God, one needed to be born again (3). The argument presented is that being born of the Spirit as Christ explained (5-6), was referring to Paul's concept of being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

The message taken to other nations across the world often bred in-group/out-group dynamics. However, in the history of Christianity, the conversion of Constantine saw an entire civilization changing their belief system to merge with the ideologies of Christianity (Tarnas, 2010:94). Here, instead of Christian identity setting the believers apart from the Romans, Roman customs and beliefs intermarried Christian norms and formed largely what is known as modern day Catholicism. Through the Reformation, there was a shift from somewhat pagan practices, to sound biblical teachings. This led to the formation of the protestant church, giving birth to multiple denominations. By the time the missionaries were charged with taking the gospel to new lands, Western ideologies, historical influence, and culture had already cemented themselves into Christianity - much like during the time of Constantine. Christianity is introduced to colonial nations, as a completely new religious system, often weaponised by those in power<sup>8</sup>. The colonial countries consisted of people who were introduced to the belief system and chose to identify themselves as Christian. In modern Christianity, it can be found that this process of new identity is a continuous legacy of Christian communities. In as much as many children have the opportunity of growing up in households with Christian parents, thus have Christianity greatly influence them during their identity formation years, there are many raised in non-Christian households, who give their lives to Christ. This means Christian identity formation is still not only dependent on Christianity, but it falls prey to the identity teachings and beliefs that the individual was raised to have. First the chapter will answer the research questions proposed in chapter one. A summary of the key findings of the study will be provided, with special attention given to interpreting the results attained from the study. Since this a Master's thesis, there are a number of limitations that the study was faced with, these limitations will be explored. Then recommendations for implementation of the findings provided in this paper, and research gaps highlighted by this study will be provided. This will provide a conclusion of the study, providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of what forming the theological implications of forming an identity in Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a concept that is not explored within this study, but is widely studied within the field of theology, particularly liberation theology.

## **5.2 AN IDENTITY IN CHRIST FROM A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The primary objective of this study was to reflect on identity formation and identity formation in Christ from a theological anthropological perspective.

### **5.2.1 Identity and Identity formation**

Identity has been defined over time and across multiple disciplines. Since identity is such an abstract concept, providing a definition for the construct is something that has fascinated many academics. One thing that most of these disciplines agree on is that identity is a two-fold construct, one personal and another social (Fearon, 1999:2; APA, 2022). Personal identity answers the question, “who am I?” The answer to this question often encompasses those parts of oneself that are deemed unchangeable – characteristics like race, ethnicity, age, shoe size, body type, hair texture, etc. These features are often features that one is born with or naturally grows into overtime. These might not always be features which bring an individual pride. In fact, many individuals might struggle to accept these parts of themselves as who they are and try to negotiate their way out of this during their identity formation years. Consider the obsession that most teenagers and young adults have with their physical appearances. However, the ultimate goal of identity formation where innate characteristics are concerned is to reach a place of healthy acceptance. Certain aspects or attributes of an individual form a pinnacle part of their identity. These are attributes often set the individual apart from others. While many people can be black Xhosa women, only one can claim to be writing this particular thesis at this point in time. These attributes that make one different from others, are attributes that an individual is aware of. The internalisation of these attributes are what makes them a personal identities (Fearon, 1999:23). When one becomes a believer, they personally choose to identify themselves as a member of the body of Christ.

Personal identity often feeds into one’s social identity. One’s social identity refers to the affiliations that one shares with a larger group. These affiliations are often influenced by their personal identities. In collectivistic worldviews, such as Christianity, where ‘we’ is greater than ‘I’, social identity is quite important. Social identity creates in-group/out-group dynamics, where one group identifies as an ‘us’ and creates and

obvious 'them'. Noted that this is often the case where Christianity develops, it seeks to set itself apart from the existing social groups. Today, social identities are more likely to be assumed rather than prescribed. Where in the past an outside group could prescribe certain identities to people, it is no longer the case. In today's society, people often get to choose which groups they belong to and how they exist within these social groups. Social identities often include the roles and functions that one fulfills within a social system. These form a part of one's identity, though they do not limit one's identity.

## **5.2.2 Understanding the *Imago Dei* in Relation to Identity**

### ***Creation and Identity Formation***

Theological thought holds that a true quest for identity can only be found in God the Creator of humanity. For it was God who saw it fit to create humanity, thus He would know who and what man ought to be collectively, and individually. The author of Genesis poetically depicts the creation of human beings. The poetic nature which God speaks to Himself in creating human beings, reveals the fundamental identity of humanity at creation. Humanity was created to be the *imago Dei* on earth. Thus, in the quest for identity formation, believers ought to be taught what it means to be in the image of God. The fundamental object of reflection in understanding what this means, ought to be God. In providing an understanding of who humanity is, God should be studied as he is revealed in Scripture and through the experiences of others. Interestingly, in understanding God, there is no room to debate His existence, even the authors of Genesis, did not provide a justification for His existence. All the reader knows from the first sentence in Genesis, is that there is a God, then eventually that humanity is made in this God's image. Adam and Eve play an interesting role in the understanding and manifestation of the image of God. Created in pairs, there is a social identity given to humankind at creation (Rosner, 2017:76). Where humanity is identified as the image of God, collectively. Both man and woman are created in the image of God, thus what bonds humanity to each other is their collective identity as the image of Adam and Eve. The identity of humanity is not limited to the role and function of ruling and dominion over the earth. They partake in God's identity as ruler of all of Creation, here on earth. Since knowing God is a continuous process, according

to what God reveals to humanity over time, even our understanding of the *imago Dei* is rather limited and can only be influenced by our knowledge of God.

### ***The Fall of Humanity***

The fall of Adam and Eve, led to the fall of humanity. All of humanity is said to be in the image of Adam. Where in the beginning Adam fully trusted God, with the fall, Adam, no longer trusted God, and instead he mistrusted the goodness of God, and hid from him when he had sinned. Sin caused what was once a relationship of trust based on God's providence, to be a relationship of doubt and fear, always trying to save themselves. The sin of Adam and Eve is referred to as the original sin. This original sin shaped the identity formation of Adam and Eve, our common ancestors. Sin can be viewed as a system which keeps people from realising their shared identity as the image of God (Vorster, 2020:4). The system of sin is argued to be hereditary, passed down from one generation to the next through humanity's genetic makeup (Vorster, 2020:4). However, it can also be argued that this system is passed down socially, through social and historical structures. Sin thrives where injustice prevails. As sin prevails, the relationship which humanity has with God is further distorted. Instead of living of their identity as the *imago Dei*, they get are pulled into the inescapable system of sin. The sin of Adam began the system of sin; however, it is the individual sins of humanity which bring them guilt and condemnation. Unfortunately, most come to realise that sin is a pinnacle part of who they are during their identity formation years. It is at this point that many are confronted with morality and their values. While upholding some principles, they notice that they fall in others and sometimes break the standards they hold themselves towards. Fortunately for humanity, God did not leave them to their systematic battle against sin. Instead, He made a way for all of humanity to be saved from the oppressive power of sin through His son, Jesus Christ.

### **5.2.3 Having an Identity in Christ**

#### ***Christ the imago Dei and Christianity***

Christ is the only man born of a woman who did not come from the loins of Adam, therefore does not inherit the fallen nature of Adam. Christ is the first recorded son of

God, who was born of a woman. Much like a child is the image of their father, Seth the image of Adam, Christ is the image of God. This makes Jesus the new expression of the image of God, the second Adam. Jesus lived amongst humanity to show humanity how they ought to relate to God. Christ fully trusted God, even unto death. Therefore, Christ becomes the standard that humanity ought to look towards in understanding the image of God. This is what gives rise to the Christian religious system.

Believers who follow Christ were first referred to as Jesus's disciples. Over time as they interacted with people across different nations, they began to be called Christians, followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). In proclaiming to be followers of Christ, believers declare that they are the image of Christ. The life of Paul offers the best example in understanding what the Christian's identity is once they are saved. The fall of humanity came through the man Adam, but the salvation of humanity, comes through the man Jesus Christ. Sin created an inescapable system which keeps humanity bound within it, but Christ becomes the solution. Where there was no escape from sin before, the crucifixion of Christ offers a clear way out – by faith in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ Jesus offers what Jesus referred to as being born again in the Spirit. It offers a new identity to the believers. Where Christ, the image of God, is the archetype for identity formation. Bringing humanities focus back to God, in whose image Christ is born. In claiming to be Christian, believers declare on a daily basis that they are in the image of Christ – the image of God.

#### **5.2.4 The Influence of pre-existing identities on New Identity Formations in Christianity**

Christianity does not develop in isolation. From the introduction of Christianity, it had to contend with existing identities. The early church was established in a Jewish religious system, within a Graeco-Roman society. The writings of the disciples often reflect this establishment of an identity that is different to the identities that existed before. Where ethnicity was often a criterion for affiliation into these communities. Christianity does not give relevance to which family line one was born into. Instead, it is by faith that every individual is saved. Salvation, no longer a birth right of exclusivity, but rather all of humanities inheritance by faith. Christians were identified as a group of believers who spread the gospel message of Christ. A religion whose development

was largely developed by Judaism, but fundamentally different from it. The painful separation of parent and child being the main metaphor which can be used to characterise Christianity's identity in relation to Israel. Christianity inherits the history of the Jews but does not take part in their rejection of Christ.

The world power at the time was the Roman empire. Although these Christians were inhabitants of Roman cities, they did not view themselves as citizens of this world. Early Christians understood themselves to be citizens of heaven, here on earth as sojourners. They were simply passing through, the earth, awaiting their transition into the everlasting. As sojourners they also understood themselves as citizens of the world, belonging to every nation, with the goal of sharing the gospel message of Christ with all. Though they interacted with other cultures, Christianity created a culture of their own, which set them apart from everyone else, as their identity was shaped by their identity in Christ. Identity was first Christ, and from there everything else flowed. In other words, Paul was first a believer of Christ, then he was a Jew, and citizen of Rome. Paul was first a Christian, then a man, and any other identity he assumed.

The same should be said about believers today. However, this is not always the case. From the first century Christians, to modern day Christianity, there were multiple influences to Christianity. These influences on Christianity, have, in my opinion, robbed Christianity of its authenticity.

### ***Narrative Theology***

Since identity is not necessarily an observable construct, narrative theology is the lens through which one can attempt to understand identity and identity formation within the Christian community. Narrative theology concerns itself with understanding man's story with God and nature. The narratives of man become instrumental in revealing the nature of God, the principles of God, the warnings of God, His wisdoms, and all that God desires to reveal to humanity. The Bible itself is a compilation of other people's experiences with God. Narrative theology refocuses the lens of theology to the narrative, not only as a tool to deliver truth, but also as the truth itself. Narratives shared by people help us understand the world around us. It is not only the lessons learnt from the narratives which are important but the very narratives themselves are paramount and should not be neglected. Narrative theology also provides our vocal

society a platform to tell their story and record their own journeys with God. In today's society, everyone has a voice, every one has a story to tell, and given the right platform one could find themselves sharing their experiences with millions of people. For believers who share about their walk with God, a lot of this is a reflection of narrative theology.

Individual journeys when recorded give a reflection that identity formation today, still looks like identity formation the early church faced. The believer is faced with the task of abandoning old identities, for new identities. There is often a polarised view between one's ethnic identity, and Christianity. Today, due to the influence of Western civilization in the spreading of the gospel, Christianity is viewed as a white man's religion. However, it is no secret that Christianity is in fact an Eastern religion, birthed in the Palestinian region. Thus, the influence of Western philosophies on the Bible ought to be separated from Christianity itself. Particularly because the West has committed many crimes, weaponising the very Bible and gospel message they felt so implored to share.

### **5.3 STUDY LIMITATIONS**

This study has been conducted in a limited time period. For this reason, there were a number of limitations that came about. There exists a plethora of information on identity, and as such there was not enough time to go through every single article which exists pertaining to identity and identity formation. Since this was an interdisciplinary study, it would have been useful to have someone from Psychology, Sociology or Politics as a second study leader. However, due to time constraints and access, it was rather hard to attempt to have two study leaders. This, to some degree, influenced the information gathered, although I do believe that under the guidance of my study leader, I managed to make giant leaps and strides. Had more time been allocated to the study, I might have picked up on this being a potential limitation sooner and requested a second study leader. This would have made sorting through information a bit simpler, and created a more interdisciplinary study, facilitating a greater merger between these fields of discipline.

Since the study focused primarily on identity and identity formation, there was no time to explore other fields which arose to address the problem of identity, such as African

theology. African theology and liberation theology have made strides in bringing about an understanding of identity in the modern world. However, the limitedness of the study did not permit me to explore these thoughts and interact with them in a conducive manner.

The study would have benefited from statistics gathered around the age of Christian identity formation within the South African region. This would have added value to the discussion as there would be research provided on the age which identity formation takes place for Christians. Current trends on identity and identity formation tend to rely heavily on Psychology, however, I believe if the church concerned itself with understanding when Christian conversion normally takes place, it could great influence where focus is placed in terms of evangelism.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

Of course, the first recommendation would be further studies on the age of conversion amongst the South African population. It might also benefit the church to study the age which many believers fall away. In my walk, I have seen many fall away from their faith, in the same time that I was finding Christ for myself. A survey with these records and numbers could greatly benefit the theology today.

This study indicated a gap within theological steps towards ridding itself of Western thought and influence. This I do not utter carelessly as I am aware that a call away from Western thought would be a time-consuming task. But perhaps, if all of theology, and not only sects of theology, investigated elements of Western philosophical thought within theology and creating distance between Christian thought and Western thought, a more pure Christian theology might be achieved.

Identity formation modules exist within churches, but perhaps, with the rise of deconstruction theology, the field of theology ought to develop models which account for existing identities. Identity formation will forever be a part of the Christian identity, therefore coming up with easier, more conducive ways an individual can build an identity, while divorcing traits which are not necessarily Christian from Christianity, is necessary. This will not only help the church, but the houses within which Christian children are raised.

One more area I believe that could benefit greatly from further study, is understanding how identity formation takes place in light of existing identities. Particularly in communities that have been ostracised by Christianity across history. Providing and understanding of how Africans, for example, navigate Christian identity formation in the modern world.

## **5.5 CONCLUSION**

Identity formation within the Christian community should be centred around Christ. An individual chooses for themselves whether they want to follow Christ or not. This element of personal identity influences the rest of their identities. Christianity is not just a construct that one adds to a list of identities, it is the foundation on which every other identity is formed. Just as Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, then they were created male and female. In the same way, those who are in Christ, are first Christian, not their ethnicity, gender, race, etc. Thus, it is important that Christ and God is reflected on to understand the true identity of humankind. Although sin creates a system that keeps humanity in strife with God, Jesus came to reconcile humanity with God. Therefore, humanities focus need not be on sin, but rather on Christ who came to save us. When humanity sins, instead of hiding as our common ancestors did, our responsibility is to trust God. Instead of hiding from God out of fear, sin ought to be brought to God in faith that the blood of Jesus covers a multitude of sin. The Christian, like those of the early church, should recognise that they are set apart. They are not of this world, but rather of a world that is to come. Therefore, as sojourners here on earth they ought to identify, understanding that they are not citizens of this world, but rather of the world that is to come.

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