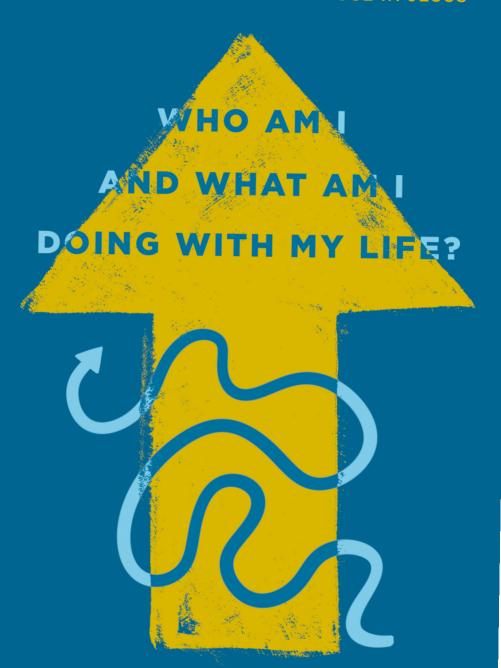
FINDING STABILITY AND PURPOSE IN JESUS



JUSTIN N. POYTHRESS

"To live in the modern world is to be faced with endless possibilities: to be steeped in ready-made answers to the question, 'Who am I?' This book takes up many of the central questions which all of us face in forming an identity and reframes them by placing Christ at the center. With remarkable warmth, wisdom, and generosity, Justin Poythress encourages readers to embrace a fullness of identity and purpose: a fullness unique to each person, yet one reflecting the fullness of the one who called each of us into being."

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, Author, You Have a Calling

"Who Am I and What Am I Doing with My Life? is a steady and trustworthy revealing of God's answer to the question aglow within each one of us: Who am I? It is deeply wise and pervasively insightful. I will be using this book in my life and ministry."

DANE ORTLUND, Author, *Gentle and Lowly*

"There are few matters more important to young adults than establishing their identity. Yet, in today's culture and climate, there are few matters that are more confusing. Justin Poythress's book will help readers find stability and purpose, not in custom-crafting an identity from the myriad of options available to them but by grounding it firmly and faithfully in the Lord Jesus Christ. This book will prove a trusted guide to anyone who is wrestling through who they are and who God has made them to be."

TIM CHALLIES, Author, Seasons of Sorrow

"Engaging, accessible, and biblically faithful. Justin has a pastoral heart and a rooted sense of the real spiritual issues we encounter with our identity. In a culture drowning in expressivism, this book is a life raft. We will only ever know ourselves as we come to know and love Jesus, whose Spirit transforms us into the most beautiful version of ourselves. May this book be a welcome call to daily put on your Jesus-self and put off your sinful self. The more you apply that biblical counsel, the more you will find peace in being yourself: a self for whom God has great purposes and plans."

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS, Senior Writer, Westminster Theological Seminary "Justin Poythress extends a warm invitation to the transforming freedom of immersing ourselves in our master identity in Christ. Gift this title to your favorite aimless twenty-something—but only after you sneak a read yourself."

HOLLY MACKLE, Host, Unseriously podcast

"Justin Poythress is careful in his thinking and full of care for the reader—truthful and gentle and biblical. He deals forthrightly with the felt questions of identity, addressing those matters that weigh on people's hearts and minds, and he does so by constantly turning the reader's attention to biblical truths and invitations. At times this book is uncomfortable because of how it presses against our desires and inclinations, but it consistently moves the reader toward formation by Christ and identity in him. This book will strengthen and help any reader who approaches it in humility and good faith."

BARNABAS PIPER, Author, Hoping for Happiness; Assistant Pastor, Immanuel Nashville

"Justin Poythress biblically tackles what our culture seems to be continually obsessed with—identity. He has written a gospel antidote to the poisonous cultural fascination of searching inside yourself to discover your true identity. This book will be enormously helpful to any follower of Christ who wrestles with important questions about who they are and what in the world they're supposed to be doing."

SHELBY ABBOTT, Author; Speaker (Campus Ministries)

"Justin has given us a valuable contribution to the literature on finding your identity in Jesus. He explains, in simple terms, the philosophies and narratives of the past and present while subjecting them to a biblical analysis, and then goes on to offer a good framework for a pathway forward."

MATT FULLER, Author, Be True to Yourself; Senior Minister, Christ Church Mayfair, London

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JUSTIN N. POYTHRESS



Who Am I and What Am I Doing with My Life? Finding Stability and Purpose in Jesus

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Dedicated to Liz, who helps me become who I am in Jesus.

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CHAPTER 1

Who Are You?

What did he want to do? What if art never pays the bills? Some friends have just given up and moved back home. Luke knows he's got a lot to offer—he's good with people. He's got a lot to at art and design. He's funny. He can work hard. But none of this has seemed to translate into anything. He's just getting older. Maybe he should just move back home too.

Andrea is eighteen. Her dad is a navy officer, a few years from retirement. She's spent her whole childhood moving, never staying anywhere longer than two or three years. She's loved the diversity of people she's been around—different ethnicities, religions, and cultures. She has learned to fit in with any group. She can small talk about hair and makeup, and she can geek out about Greek mythology. But being a master chameleon means she isn't really sure who she is. Her family has always attended

church regularly, and this part of her identity tends to shut her out of the most popular circles. Her dad's most recent assignment was in Florida, so Andrea enrolled in the University of Central Florida—the largest, most diverse university she could find. She'll be starting over yet again. Which side of herself should she lead with? Which groups should she attach to, and how deeply? There is almost no one that she *couldn't* be.

Trent just turned thirty-three. He's been married for a couple of years, and he couldn't have imagined a better partner. He and his wife are aligned politically and religiously. They're both intelligent, successful, and upwardly mobile in their careers, with no children. Trent's been working like a dog for the past three years to make partner at his law firm. But as the finish line is coming into view, panic is setting in. Trent has begun seeing the current partners in a new light. Is this the life he really wants? Breaking away from the firm and starting over at this stage seems terrifying, but so does the prospect of cementing himself in this job and closing off all his other options. Does he want kids? What if he and his wife plant their roots but forever miss this window of risking something new? Trent and his wife were both brought up in Christian homes, but it's all started to feel a bit stale. He wonders whether church is really doing much for them or if they're just going out of habit.

All three of these individuals are slightly altered versions of real people. The situations and the pressure points are different, but the angst is the same: Is this who I should be? Is this where I should be? Or what I should be doing? Did I miss something?

We live in a world of endless possibilities. There's never been more freedom to create your own identity—you can go where you want, do what you want, marry who you want. You can basically create a life and even your personhood from scratch, almost like an avatar. You can reinvent yourself a hundred times if you want to, which means identity pressure has never felt more intense. Sometimes the open-endedness of life can feel like opportunity, but other times it feels like self-doubt and missing out. The range of possibilities is paralyzing.

We're most likely to feel the panic of this realization when we arrive at a pivotal moment—considering a career change, or whether to propose or to move away from home. Sometimes we feel it at a particular age; sociologist Brian Rosner calls this "cuspiety." It's the crisis that comes in reaching a cusp age (19, 29, 59) and feeling unsure about what life is, what comes next, and who you are.¹

But why wait for a year ending in nine? That sounds like my agenda tomorrow. Identity crises aren't just for the girl in her late twenties living at home and waiting tables, or the corporate drone who sold his soul for a health insurance plan and suburban grass thicker than his hair. Sometimes all it takes is someone else's photo, relationship status update, Christmas card, or casual remark about a milestone we haven't achieved, to plunge us into the same old questions: who am I really, and what on earth am I doing with my life?

So how do you find peace and certainty while you feel like you're running around a labyrinth full of dead ends? How do you make the right choices and become the person you want to be? That's what this book is all about.

I don't know what your "what ifs" are. Maybe you're young and feeling overwhelmed by all the options ahead of you. Maybe you're older and filled with regret as you

look back. Maybe your sense of instability is careerrelated or has to do with marriage, or maybe it just stems from spending time online looking at how perfect everybody else's lives seem to be.

Whatever your particular version of this looks like, though, I have something that I think will help.

Your identity will always be in flux. Circumstances and relationships change. You change. But in the midst of all that, God has a stable identity for you that makes sense of everything else. It's an identity centered on Christ. When you begin to see that as your fixed point, other things come into focus. You can relax and trust because you see where God is taking you. When you understand the identity project God is working on in you, it will give you a sense of confidence and peace about who you are and who you are becoming. You really can feel secure even while the world around you is churning, fraught with weighty decisions and potential wrong turns. The Bible says that Christians will spend a lifetime discovering the riches of the mystery that is their identity: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). In Jesus, you have a glorious identity that keeps getting better.

We're going to talk about Jesus some more later in this chapter. But first, in order to get a better sense of yourself and the direction you should be going, we need to understand a little more what identity is.

What Is Identity? (It's Complicated)

Your identity is your sense of self. It involves looking inside yourself to evaluate who you are and what you're like. You're a Brazilian, a musician, an engineer, a father.

But identity isn't just about how you would describe yourself right now. It also has a backward-looking and a forward-looking component. That's why a one-year-old boy who lives in the present will have rather little to say about his identity—he's not looking backward into his past or forward to his future. But one day, when he's a little older, he'll look back and say, "I've always been talkative"—or he'll look forward and say, "I want to be a firefighter when I grow up."

Identity discussions, then, are a push-pull between understanding who you are as a product of the past and who you wish to be in the future. Still, the question of the future always sits in the driver's seat. Even if you're doing some kind of deep dive down the rabbit hole of your subconscious, you're doing it for the sake of your future. How will what I discover help me live better tomorrow?

Another way to say this is that you are both being and becoming. You are stable and growing. You will get edgy if you feel like someone is trying to pin you down to only one of those aspects. Imagine that when you were seven, you were proud to show your Uncle Steve that you learned to juggle. That was great back then—but you're not too pleased that he continues to introduce you as "my niece, the juggler." Your identity isn't just about that one element of your past! It's the same with your future. Let's say that every time you visit your grandma, she hints that she's available for daycare as soon as you find that someone special. Sure, maybe one day I'll have kids, Grandma, but that's not what my life is about right now!

This desire for being and becoming (an identity that's both stable and growing) is why models and professional athletes often have such a hard time later in life. On the one hand, when you're fifty, you don't want everyone to forget that you were a world-class tennis player—to feel like the identity that you devoted twelve hours a day, twenty-five years of your life to was a waste and you're already a footnote. But a perpetual recognition of your past can also keep you trapped—as if no one is interested in or even wants you to become something other than "the tennis player."

We all feel like this to some degree, world-class tennis player or not. We're caught between two desires. You long to feel that parts of you are stable and good and valuable—these are the things that make you who you are. And yet you want to be growing and maturing, open to change and development. This dual desire intersects every aspect of your identity. We want a stable sense of self but without feeling boxed in by it. We want our lives to look like the title of Michelle Obama's autobiography—one long upward journey of *Becoming*. We want to be rooted but growing. How can you be both?

Given these competing desires and realities, here's a definition of identity:

Identity is your sense of self that connects who you are as a product of your past with who you wish to be in the future.

But before we figure out how to find stability between these forward-looking and backward-looking aspects, you need to understand something more about yourself. Or should I say, your *selves*.

Identities of Origin, Role, and Affinity

Imagine several people are gathered in a room. There's a nine-year-old boy who loves to draw and dance to Kanye West and who uses the words "et cetera" a lot. There's also an intelligent, middle-aged man with OCD who touches everything with a yellow rag and also has a track record of abuse. There's a cussing but kind-hearted teenage girl who takes insulin shots for her diabetes. And there's a tenured professor who specializes in 1950s-80s Japanese cinema. Here's the twist: they are all the same person.

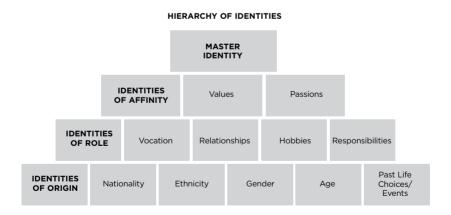
This is M. Night Shyamalan's thriller *Split*, in which the antagonist suffers from dissociative identity disorder (formerly multiple personality disorder). He has twenty-three distinct personalities living within him, each one complete with its own mannerisms, accents, and even health conditions. The movie builds towards the emergence of a twenty-fourth personality—a beast with superhuman strength. And although you're unlikely to identify as a mythical beast, Shyamalan plays with a question that haunts all of us—who are you, really? Maybe it feels like you could be any one of at least eight different personalities. Which one is the real you? And who else *could* you be if you set your mind to it?

This is why your identity feels complex and confusing. You're never just one thing. A better way to think about your self is that you have dozens, even hundreds of "identities" or "selves" inside of you. Each of them is valid, but each one of them only tells part of the story.

I don't want this to sound weird. I'm only one person. There's only one name on my ID card—Justin N. Poythress. But I can also talk about my identity as a husband, a pastor, a Dallas Cowboys fan, and the kind of person who loves

coffee and craft root beer. I have one (somewhat) unified identity composed of multiple sub-identities. Sociologists have collected ten traditional identity markers: race, ethnicity and nationality; gender and sexuality; physical and mental capacity; religion; cultural background; family of origin; close relationships; occupations; possessions; and age.²

I believe we can think about identity in three basic layers of "sub-identities." To be clear, I'm not a sociologist. I don't think I'm creating something new. Human nature doesn't change. I've simply attempted to come up with some categorical terms to package the various elements of identity that we all reference when we talk about it in the 21st century. These three layers of identity are identities of origin, identities of role, and identities of affinity.



Identities of Origin

We get all our big identities of origin at birth. They include things like ethnicity, gender, nationality, time and place of birth, parents, and lineage. As life goes on, your identity of origin continues to collect more historical, objective identity-shaping events—both ones you have chosen and ones that have just happened to you. Let's say you're born in Hong Kong, but you move to London at age five. If you haven't moved again by age ten, London has now become another significant identity of origin. Also, that time when you were eight and your neighbor's German Shepherd escaped and chased you four blocks up the street—that event has become an identity of origin that shapes how you view strange dogs.

Identities of Role

Identities of role have to do with responsibilities. Responsibilities are tied to relationships. You might have a role as an uncle, aunt, son, grandmother, boss, employee, volunteer, colleague, or friend. Sometimes you wear more than one hat at the same time. The importance of any given role in your identity has to do with the weight you feel *from* that responsibility. For example, one of my roles at home is doing the dishes. But I will not request the epitaph:

Justin Unloader of the dishwasher

I'm hoping it's not that important.

Your roles span all kinds of activities including vocations, hobbies, and services. You could be a student, nanny, golfer, lawyer, or handyman. You slide in and out of roles over your lifetime or within a given day. We don't live our

lives basking in the reflective zen of a weekend retreat on personality types. A role like driver-of-a-car, though it may not seem substantive, matters a good deal when you get behind that wheel. Your roles are like one of those sensory pin boards that holds the impression of your hand or nose. A role rises or falls in its prominence depending on how hard you press on it.

Identities of Affinity

If you think in terms of stable and growing, your identities of affinity are the ones that grow and change the most. This category includes anything someone is passionate about. Obviously, that changes. Passions rise, recede, or vanish altogether. You have a long runway to gather speed; then, before you know it, you're flying around the world in your passion plane. The question becomes: what other part of life or society will you visit with that passion? And where will you not just visit but take up residence, and put that passion to work?

Affinity is the outermost layer of identity—the one we most easily put on or discard. But when you decide to wear an affinity with pride, it's the first thing people will notice about you. Identities of affinity include things like playing tennis, watching *The Office*, political parties, religious affiliations, your favorite musical artist, or fitness or nutrition lifestyles. An identity of affinity has the most intrinsic ability to seize command over your whole life. As an identity of affinity grows in importance, it will start doing big things, like shaping your community and your values, and reshuffling your schedule.

You've probably spotted the difficulty. Identities can overlap into two or all three of these categories. Your

love for animals starts off as an identity of affinity but becomes an identity of role if you become a veterinarian. Your time spent in Peru as a child (an identity of origin) turns into a lifelong interest in Latin American cuisine (an identity of affinity). And so on.

These identities grow and shrink in importance over time. Your sense of self today differs from how you experienced it yesterday. Or for that matter, two hours ago. There are different events, pressures, and desires weighing on you right now that push you toward one package of sub-identities versus another. And even if you zero in on one sub-identity that you decide you will emphasize throughout your whole life, like being a mother, what that identity means to you will also change over time.

Life can feel like one long game of five-card poker. You can only hold five cards in your hand at one time, but you're always drawing, discarding, rearranging, or restarting in order to work your way toward a winning hand at *that* specific moment.

One Identity to Rule Them All-A Master Identity

In the poker game of life (unlike in M. Night Shyamalan's *Split*), you do realize that you are only *one person* holding all these cards—one person making all these decisions. This is where a "master identity" comes in. A master identity gives you the stability you need to navigate your changing circumstances and your shifting and developing sub-identities. A master identity is also subject to change, but this happens more slowly and deliberately than with your other identities. An easy way to boil it down in your own mind is to force yourself to fill in this blank with one

word: I am a _____. Whatever you put there is your master identity.

A master identity is like the CEO running the company of your self. It promotes one sub-identity and fires another. It hands out bonuses and growth plans. Let's say your master identity is "artsy filmmaker." It gives a corner office to that part of you that collects Alfred Hitchcock memorabilia. Meanwhile, it stuffs your suburban, summer-sports-camp upbringing into the basement to file paperwork.

This master identity works as a sort of interpretive grid for how you see the world and interact with others. For example, let's say you have a friend who got into the keto diet and went a little bit overboard. It's now become his master identity. You'll be talking about your car leaking coolant, and he'll pipe up, "That's what I felt like till I cut out the carbs." The keto diet is now his response to everything!

You can see how important a master identity is. In fact, having a master identity is the only way we can make sense of all these selves we've got inside of us. And ideally, we need a good one. The keto diet is not going to be enough to reconcile all these competing identities. Nor is being an artsy filmmaker.

But Jesus will be enough.

The Answer

In Romans 8:29, God explains his identity plan for every Christian for all time: he "predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son."

With Jesus, you receive a new identity—or, more accurately, you receive a resurrected identity. Who you are, at your deepest level, is now connected to Jesus. And

you're becoming more like Jesus—less sinful, more godly. You're being conformed to his image.

There is a sense in which the Christian life is *all about* identity. It's about discovering and recovering who you were really designed to be.

God intentionally designed you the way that you are—with your personality, background, gifts, and talents. Yet you and I are far from being what we could be. We make bad choices; we act as the worst version of ourselves; we go off on the wrong track.

But in Christ, you are becoming more of who you are supposed to be. That's what God is up to in your life.

As you live connected to Jesus, God enters your unique origins, roles, and affinities, and builds you up through those things. He may alter the identities that you find most important, but he will always be leading you on an upward journey. You will become a more "life-sized" version of you. You will get to discover who you *really* are and what you're *really* made for. You'll still spend the rest of your life growing and becoming. You'll still wonder what your next choice should be. But no matter what, this image of Jesus that you're moving toward *never* changes.

When you understand that transformation isn't merely the process but also the purpose of what God is up to in your life, your sense of identity will feel stable even while it grows.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- 1. What situations have led you to questions about your identity? Why?
- 2. Think about one aspect of your identity. In what way is this connected with your past and future? How does your future vision of yourself have an impact on what's important to your identity today?
- 3. How would the master identity of a relationship with Jesus reshape your perspective on the other parts of your identity?