



## Identity in a Digital Age

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**M**ichelle and Madison were under the same roof but in two different worlds. They were thousands of miles apart though only thirty feet separated them. Both sat looking at their own computer screens: Michelle, Madison's mother, updating her Facebook profile while chatting with an old friend from high school living on the other coast, Madison video-skyping with her neighbor and the foreign-exchange student who had just returned to Brazil, while updating her Flickr and checking her photo ratings. Two people under the same roof, but in two different spaces; two people bending time and space, connecting with others over far distances in an instant.

Our experiences of time and space are not what they used to be. Vast spaces are easily crossed through cell phones, the Internet, and relatively cheap air travel. We all have become movers in our time, even when we are sitting still; like Michelle and Madison, we are moving across space, bouncing in and out of worlds. And it is not just space; time, too, has been transformed into something we can (or something we *think* we can) control. My TiVo literally allows me to catch up to time when I start watching *Lost* twenty minutes into the show. Fast-forwarding through the commercials, I move through the time of the show quickly to catch up to the now (or the now of my TV recording the show). I keep waiting for TiVo technology to work in the Department of Motor Vehicles line, wishing I could fast forward the boring and unimportant moments in my daily life.

All this technological transformation does more to us than give us new things

*Not long ago, "identity" was understood to be established and retained more-or-less as is throughout life. No longer. The digital shrinking of time and space has made identity fluid, and the church faces a new task.*

to want to buy, but, in using it, it actually changes us. It changes the way we understand who we are; it has a way of impacting our very identity, or at least the very ways we construct an identity. Technology shapes our identity.

### TALK OF IDENTITY

Talk of identity has been a central element of modern life and the project of the self, as Charles Taylor and others call it.<sup>1</sup> It has often been believed that adolescence is a time of identity formation. Sometime between the ages of thirteen and twenty-something, you figure out who you are. It was Erik Erikson, one of Sigmund Freud's greatest students, who presented this thesis in the last century.<sup>2</sup> The simple idea was that adolescence was a cultural period of moratorium, a kind of societal time-out, where the individual was given time and space to figure out who she would be by figuring out what she was good at and whom she would love. While Erikson moved on from Freud in many areas, he didn't do that here; rather, he bolstered Freud's essential belief: that the healthy person was the person who could work and love. Then, in Erikson's mind, adolescence was the time when you figured out what work you could do and whom you could love for the rest of your life.

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Erikson had tied this identity formation to the biological unfolding of the individual, meaning he believed that forming your identity was somehow tied to an inner biological clock ticking inside of you. What's interesting is that Erikson, while a great cultural observer, didn't see that his own theory was imbedded in a certain historical epoch, an epoch that had radically transformed time and space in its own right.

Erikson is often assumed to be the great modernist developmental psychologist, and a modernist he was. But I don't mean modernist as a bad word, as we so often use it today, as if "modernist" refers to old, rigid, and confined. Rather, modernity had its own genius, a genius that we still happily live with today. At its core, modernity turned our attention away from the past and toward the future. For most of human history, human life was really about assimilation of the past (past wisdom, ancient stories). To live in your now, you had to assimilate yourself to the past; to survive your now, you would need the wisdom and maybe the spirit of your fathers. Modernity breaks this past-looking inclination and turns our chin toward the future. Modernity says, "Forget the past! The past is old (and old is bad).

<sup>1</sup>See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>See Erik Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

The future is before you; go and make a life for yourself!” While for most of human history life was organized by what *was* in the past (tradition), modernity organizes life by what *can be* in the future.<sup>3</sup>

The German sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says, “The day the traditional community was upended by modernity is the day talk of identity began.”<sup>4</sup> For most of human history there was little to no conversation about identity. You were given a closed answer to the question “Who am I?” Your community, tribe, or village answered this question for you, and you as an individual had little or no power to change the answer. Historians even tell us there was very little individual self-reflection, such as journals and love letters. Few people had the time or freedom to think about who they were; their given definition was enough.

But once modernity opens up the future, things change; then it becomes up to *you* to figure out who you are. Modernity undercuts tradition as a closed, all-encompassing system; now the future and what you can do in the future is what matters, not assimilation to a past tradition. Time and space are changed by modernity; both become open and able to be controlled by an individual.

It would be no wonder that Erikson, then, would make identity a central task of human life in modernity, though identity is more a cultural reality than the biological one that Erikson saw it to be. Adolescence, culturally, is that period when your future is before you, and when you are able to reflect upon yourself—two of the essential necessities to being a future-moving citizen of modernity.

#### WORK AND LOVE ARE TRANSITIONING

Identity, figuring out who you are, as we said, was formed around your work and your love. So, after figuring out what you were good at, you would get some training and become that. If in adolescence you figured out you were good at math, you would study math and then become an accountant. If someone asked you, “Who are you?” you might say, “I’m Bill, I’m an accountant.” You knew yourself by what you did. But it was more than this, because at some point in adolescence, or shortly thereafter, you would find a love, get married, have three children, and start volunteering at the PTA. You were not only an accountant but also a husband or wife. With these two answers to who you are (what you do and whom you love), it was imagined that you had an identity, that you had a single self-definition. After all, you would probably be an accountant at the same corporation for the next four or five decades, and you would be married to this person for the next fifty or sixty years.

But as technology has sped up time and shortened space in advancing modernity, as time and space can even be manipulated by Michelle and Madison, the foundations of identity have melted. Work and love have not held up well in the

<sup>3</sup>This is British social theorist Anthony Giddens’s argument in a number of works; see, for instance *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) 16.

blur of time and space. It is very unlikely that anyone stays in one career (let alone one job) for forty years; there are fewer and fewer gold watches anymore. The statistics are always changing, but some say that Americans change *careers* on average every twenty months.<sup>5</sup> It is rarely assumed that high school is the time young people find their life's work. Work is no longer a viable foundation on which to build an identity. But of course neither is love. Love as a constant and continued commitment (even when feelings wane) has not held up well in the frantic transitions of late modernity. With high divorce rates and later marriage, it's very unlikely that anyone will have one love for the rest of their life, and almost absurd to assume that most young people will find this person in high school. Identity (answering the question "Who am I?") becomes liquefied when work and love melt in the speed of our digital age.

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#### IN THEIR PLACE: MY BODY

In place of work and love, new elements of identity have come to the fore, elements made powerful by the radical transformation of time and space. Work has been transformed into consumption; what matters for my identity is not what I do, but what I can buy, and what the things I buy say about who I am. I am what I buy; what I wear communicates who I am. And I need the constant information of the Internet not only to inform me what to buy, but also to tell me what the things I buy mean, and how others are perceiving them (by commenting online).

In place of love is intimacy. We hear it often, someone will say, "I still love him, there just isn't anything there [translation: there is no intimacy]; we just want different things." As time and space have radically sped up, they have transformed the core building blocks of identity from work to consumption, from love to intimacy. And, if this is true, then it is absurd to assume that your identity is closed, that you ever settle on a single identity. For who settles on one fashion or one lover for the rest of their life? Michelle is reworking her own identity, just as Madison is reworking hers. In the blur of time and space, identity is always identity-until-further-notice. Modernity had already dethroned religion and its tradition as able to answer the question "Who am I?" Now, in the speed of a digital world, this question is always open.

If there is one constant, then, it is that I use my body as the place to work on my many fleeting identities. The body becomes the place where I broadcast who I

<sup>5</sup>See Dawn Rosenberg, "How Often Do People Change Careers?" on About.com, <http://careerplanning.about.com/b/2006/07/28/how-often-do-people-change-careers.htm> (accessed 30 April 2010).

am by hanging my consumptions on it and receiving intimacy through it. For most people, often the most fundamental identity marker is their body—“fat,” “hot,” “ugly” tells me more than anything else about who I am. The Internet is not a tool that disembodies me, but a tool that allows my body to be broadcast across time and space. Michelle takes hours finding her profile picture, and Madison’s YouTube videos show off her waistline and new jeans. We use the Internet to find out if we are hot or not; it is the great genie that gives us ratings on our bodies and provides both things to buy (Amazon) and people to be intimate with (eHarmony).

### HERE STANDS THE CHURCH: SO WHAT?

And so there stands the church, and there are the Michelles and the Madisons. What’s to be done? We may want to say that we should tell them to have their identity in Christ, and so we should, but just saying that is of no help. Rather, what we must see is that both the Michelles and the Madisons are living constantly with the question “Who am I?” We need to say something other than just religious phrases; we must be able to articulate that the Jesus we serve is the Jesus who is found in your yearning, the Jesus who is found up against your questions. There is no reason to tell them to stop searching for an identity in the blur of time and space; rather, we must together seek for God in our questions and longing.

So why does this matter to the church and those leading congregations? It matters because we often assume that it is our job to help people form an identity, and an identity that has their Christian commitment as central. And if their Christian commitment is central, then that identity, because it is based on belief, must be as solid as a rock, for if it isn’t, then neither is their faith. The problem is that identity has already been liquefied, and few people find it necessary to have one single self-definition; therefore, in a real way their (often) partial self-definition as Christian is always open. They see themselves as Christian for now, but in the future, who knows?

Of course this is a risky time, but there is an opportunity here for the church as well. The opportunity is to see conversion not as a *final destination* but as a *constant process* of reflecting deeply on one’s life, seeking God next to one’s deepest question—and there is no deeper question for people than “Who am I?” It becomes essential that pastors be able to engage young people in a process of personal/constructive theological reflection. In many ways the question “Who am I?” should be on our own minds with every sermon we give, every retreat we plan, and every Bible study we lead. It is a question never fully answered and constantly nipping at people’s heels—“Who am I?” is the starting point for deep contemplation about God, self, and world. While consumption and intimacy promise electric experiences, they are also very thin, which means that suffering is always close to the search for identity. Consumption and intimacy have short half-lives and demand constant motion, often leaving us hurting in their wake of transition. Then, ministry must seek for a theology that places God near to those who suffer, that places

God near to those who question and search for God, near to those who question who they are. Where, in the past, the objective of ministry may have been to provide religious foundations for your single self-definition, in our time the objective of ministry will be to accompany people as they journey to figure out who they are in a world where time and space are blurred and yet God seeks them in their deepest yearnings and questions. ⊕

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