

**G
T
O
GROWN UP
IN
GRACE**

The title is rendered in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The words are arranged in a staggered, vertical layout. The word 'GROWN' is split into 'G', 'T', and 'O' on the left side. 'UP' is positioned below 'O'. 'IN' is to the right of 'UP'. 'GRACE' is at the bottom. The text is surrounded by various teal and green decorative elements: a wavy line on the left, a flower above 'G', a bird silhouette to the right, a triangle below 'O', a swirl above 'I', a large arrow pointing right on the right side, and a large stylized 'W' shape at the bottom left. Small teal circles are scattered throughout the design.

**JONATHAN D.
HOLMES**

HELPING KIDS BUILD THEIR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

“In *Grounded in Grace*, Jonathan Holmes shares biblical principles and practical ways to have conversations with our children that will help them flourish by embracing their identity in Christ. Parents, your children need you to read this book!”

Darby Strickland, CCEF Counselor and Faculty

“Jonathan Holmes rightly challenges and encourages us to consider the ways we allow all the wrong influences to shape our kids and shows us how pointing them back to the Lord liberates them to truly be who they were created to be.”

Julie Lowe, Counselor; speaker; author of *Safeguards*

“There may be no more important issue facing parents in our day than how we help our children discover the biblical answer to the question: *Who am I?* I’m urging parents I know who have teenagers and preteens to read *Grounded in Grace* by Jonathan Holmes.”

Bob Lepine, Pastor, Redeemer Community Church, Little Rock, AR; author; longtime cohost, *FamilyLife Today*

“Jonathan Holmes’s book, *Grounded in Grace*, is a wonderful blend of biblical insight and practical wisdom on this most personal subject of identity. A gift for parents in our confusing age.”

Brian S. Rosner, Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia; author of *How to Find Yourself: Why Looking Inward Is Not the Answer*

“The genius of this book is that it takes the complicated (and vitally important) topic of identity and makes it understandable and it also equips parents to engage with their children in ways that are real, honest, and above all, biblically faithful.”

Steve Midgley, Executive Director, Biblical Counselling UK

“*Grounded in Grace* offers vital direction amidst today’s confusion about identity formation. Each page offers biblical truth and compassionate wisdom to guide families through the maze of insecurities and influences children face.”

Eliza Huie, Director of Counseling, McLean Bible Church, Vienna, VA

“Reading this book will not only help you be more prepared as a parent but better equipped as a Christian.”

Rebekah Hannah, Director of Kids and Families, Redeemer LSQ; President & CEO, Anchored Hope Virtual Counseling

“I hope every parent in my church gets a copy of *Grounded in Grace* to be equipped for teaching and training their kids in some of the most pressing and significant topics that kids and teenagers are facing today!”

Kyle Hoffsmith, Pastor of Family Ministry, Old North Church; board member, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding; podcast host, *The Word in Youth Ministry*

“This informative and practical resource empowers parents to engage in compassionate conversations with their kids about identity. Through relatable stories and thought-provoking questions, Holmes points to a gospel-centered identity with grace as its foundation.”

Shauna Van Dyke, Founder & Biblical Counselor, Truth Renewed Ministries; strategic advisor, the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC)

“Not only does Jonathan Holmes identify common challenges to our children’s identity formation, but he shows how the gospel of grace gives kids eternal clarity amidst their temporal confusion.”

Christine Chappell, Author of *Midnight Mercies*; host, *Hope + Help Podcast*; certified biblical counselor

“There may be no more important topic Christian parents can focus on right now than their kids’ identity formation. The stakes are high on this one. *Grounded in Grace* covers this topic thoroughly, biblically, and practically.”

Monica Swanson, Author; podcast host

“In *Grounded in Grace*, Jonathan Holmes looks at our modern identity crisis among teens and provides clear, biblical, and practical wisdom to the most common identity problems kids face today.”

Courtney Reissig, Author of *Teach Me to Feel: Worshiping Through the Psalms in Every Season of Life*

“*Grounded in Grace* is a timely resource that equips parents to biblically shape and actively participate in their children’s formation with joyful confidence and hope.”

Joe Keller, Council Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition

Heidi Keller, Primary School Educator

“With front-row knowledge of the identity struggles of young people today, Jonathan Holmes provides parents with a biblical foundation and the practical help needed to engage adolescents in grace-filled, heart-level conversations about identity and worth.”

Kristen Hatton, Counselor; author of *Parenting Ahead*

“Every parent would benefit from the wisdom that this book brings to the hot-button topic of identity.”

Jeff and Sarah Walton, Authors of *Together Through the Storm*

“The joy and freedom of identity in Christ can be found throughout these marvelously practical and profoundly helpful pages. This book is essential reading for parents, educators, coaches, and youth ministry leaders.”

Matt Koons, Associate Head of School, Cuyahoga Valley
Christian Academy

Sara Koons, Kids and Students Director, Christ Community
Chapel

“Jonathan Holmes provides a roadmap for parents to guide their children through a myriad of challenges and ultimately to find their identity in Christ.”

Bob Butts, Chief Operating Officer, Truth for Life

Heidi Butts, Assistant to Head of School, Heritage Classical
Academy

“This book will equip you to subvert untrue identity narratives and ever-shifting cultural paradigms about sexuality with gospel truths that each of us was created to know and live out of.”

Jenny Solomon, Cofounder, Solomon SoulCare; author of
Reclaim Your Marriage: Grace for Wives Who Have Been Hurt
by Pornography

“This book provided clear and concise breakdowns of different areas of children’s lives and how to support and disciple them through whatever comes their way.”

Annie Roshak, NCAA Division II Elite Eight Most Outstanding Player and all-tournament team

“Holmes’s tactic is sincere and clear as he writes from a professional counseling and parenting perspective. This book is an invitation to see our identity in Jesus as ongoing work—as we find our identity in God’s grace, we can walk alongside our kids to help them see they are children of God.”

Bailey T. Hurley, Author of *Together Is a Beautiful Place*

“*Grounded In Grace* is an invaluable resource for parents, as well as youth pastors and Christian educators navigating the complexities of discipling children in today’s rapidly changing society. This book will be a source of strength for you as you parent.”

Lia Ross, Christian book reviewer, @liarossreads

GROUND ED IN GRACE

Helping Kids Build Their
Identity in Christ

Jonathan D. Holmes



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Dedication

To Ava, Riley, Ruby, and Emma

I love you with all my heart.

Never forget who you are and follow Jesus no matter what.

Part 1

A Tale of Two Identity-Formation Processes

Chapter 1

Identity Formation: Who Are You and How Did You Figure It Out?

There is perhaps no more pressing a topic than identity.

—Carl R. Trueman¹

Emma turned off her phone and buried her head in her pillow to cry. Her mom, Christina, lightly knocked on the door.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“I don’t want to talk right now,” Emma replied.

“Okay, well, I’m here if you do want to talk.”

“I hate my life; everyone in my grade is at homecoming tonight, and I’m stuck here without a date.”

Christina sat on Emma’s bed and tried to console her. “Oh Emma, why are you saying that? You didn’t want to go to homecoming. Did something change?”

“I don’t know. Nothing in my life is going right. I don’t like my classes, and I’m failing geometry. Plus, someone at school is spreading crazy rumors about me,” Emma cried.

“What kind of rumors?” Christina asked with a rising level of concern noticeable in her voice.

“I don’t want to talk about it. It’s so embarrassing. I just hate my life, and I feel so overwhelmed. Can you and Dad just homeschool me?”

Christina laughed out loud at this point. “Are you being serious, Emma? You told us you would never want to homeschool.

What's going on? You seem all over the map lately! You just don't seem like your happy self anymore."

Emma replied, "I don't know. It's all just so confusing. There's so much pressure to keep up with everyone. Every time I tell myself it's not a big deal, I just get more and more confused. I don't even know who I am most days."

THE PERENNIAL PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Most parents I speak with and counsel are having conversations like the one above (or versions of it) on a consistent basis. In my current role as an executive director of a large counseling center, I meet with many parents who are trying to work through identity issues with their children. I hear stories and concerns from youth pastors, youth ministry staff, and Christian school teachers and administrators about the challenges they are facing in the local church and classroom. Our children are under enormous pressure to figure out who they are in an environment and culture that is sending them conflicting messages.

"Stand out, and be who you want to be!" *but* on the flip side we don't like who you are choosing to be and we're going to make fun of you for it.

"Live your own truth, and don't let anyone take that away from you!" *but* if someone else's truth contradicts "your truth," our teens are told that those individuals are dangerous and toxic.

"Who cares what other people think about you? You do you!" *but* you do need to care what other people think about you because you need their approval.

Conversations about identity have varied from generation to generation. For the baby boomers (1946–1964) and Gen Xers (1965–1979), one's identity was often tied to what a person did. The millennials (1980–1994) are a bit of a bridge generation in that more traditional ways of forming identity began to give way to more of a modern understanding of identity. Gen Zers (1995–2012) have distanced themselves from those earlier generations. Whereas previously identity was rooted in what you did, now for many, gender identity is what you feel yourself to be. If all

of this is a bit confusing, hang tight as we explore this in greater detail in this chapter and the next.

YOUR ROLE AS A PARENT

As you consider how best to walk alongside your child as they try to figure out their identity, it's probably helpful for you to start with an understanding of what the word *identity* encompasses. Here's how counselor Todd Stryd defines identity:

Identity is generally understood as a person's sense of self or self-understanding. In the broadest scope, a person's identity is the collection of characteristics that make up who they are. These include personality traits, abilities, strengths and weaknesses, and likes and dislikes, as well as ethnicity and nationality, group affiliations, appearance, socioeconomic status, roles, value systems, and worldview.²

Put simply, when we are talking about identity, we are talking about what makes *you* you!

As we have seen, discussions of identity are complicated because people choose different foundations on which to base their identity.

So where should our children turn as they seek their own identity? A biblical understanding of this endeavor is that our child's identity must be rooted first in an understanding of who God is and what he has created us for and to be.

The greatest problem our kids are facing regarding the issue of identity is this: an anemic and even nonexistent notion of who the Lord is and what he has called us to be. Stryd continues, “. . . a true and complete human identity must include our status as a child of God and citizen of God's kingdom. This aspect of a person's identity is in fact the most fundamental—it holds all the rest together.”³

It shouldn't surprise you that it is my belief and conviction that parents⁴ are God's chosen ambassadors for this most

important work of identity formation (you did pick this book up after all!). You are given the task and stewardship of helping your child grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Parents play the formative role in the development of their child's identity. Whether we like it or not, our voice is often the loudest voice in our child's heart and mind as they seek to figure out who they are. Brian Rosner writes,

Parents knowing their children is particularly important for a child's sense of identity. Parents not only reflect back to their children their identities but also play a big role in forming those identities. Children are named by their parents and receive their earliest experiences from them. Parents pass on their own tastes, values, and worldview to their children. Indeed, parents play a big part in the formation and maintenance of their children's identity, especially when they are young.⁵

Over the next few chapters, my hope is that parents can understand the challenges our kids are facing related to developing, maintaining, and resting in their identity. However, the contents of this book will be beneficial for a variety of individuals who are teaching and discipling children and teens: youth workers, Sunday school teachers, Christian school workers, and Christian counselors. In this chapter and the next, we'll look at two views of how identity is formed—the traditional view and the modern view—and explore the historical development of each one. Strengths and weaknesses of each will be assessed, and a third way will be proposed. Additionally, this material will be helpful for a variety of other individuals who provide discipleship, care, and instruction for children. Whether you are a small group leader in your church's youth group or a Sunday school teacher, the information contained here will help you answer questions and provide solid, biblical hope in a variety of situations.

In subsequent chapters, we'll dive into five different areas where kids and teens tend to struggle with their identity:

1. Academics
2. Sports
3. Moralism
4. Gender
5. Sexuality

Chapters 3–5 will describe areas where kids build their identity on what they do, and chapters 6–7 will describe how kids build their identity on how they feel.

As you consider your child or teen, perhaps you have seen that they struggle in one of these areas or several of these areas. In each chapter, we'll explore the struggles our families are facing, the heart issues at play, and practical, gospel-centered conversations that can direct our children to the truth of who God says they are. Because there is overlap in what causes these various struggles as well as how parents can address them, I recommend that you read all five of these chapters, even if your child seems to be wrestling with only one of these issues.

But before we dive into the specifics, we need to get oriented to the current landscape of identity formation. If you are unfamiliar with terms like *identity formation*, a glossary is located on page 105 to help define and explain words you'll find in the book.

TRADITIONAL IDENTITY⁶

Historically, identity was formed in response to the question, “Who do you want to be when you grow up?” Most children would have responded with something to the effect of, “I want to be a good person. I want my parents to be proud of me.” Making parents proud was one of the most important things to a child, and it was accomplished by fulfilling the role that a son or a daughter should play in society.

In traditional settings, a son was to follow in the vocational footsteps of his father. If your father was a baker—guess what—you'd be a baker. If your father was a farmer—guess what—you'd become a farmer. Career days at the local Anglo-Saxon elementary school would have been boring and predictable.

For daughters, there was even less mystery or variety. In traditional settings, the role of a daughter was to get married, have lots and lots of children, and be a submissive wife. No dual-income households or moms who homeschooled and then moonlighted on the side as a business professional. No, daughters were raised for one primary role.

Why was this so? Well, historians tell us that this push to live a good and honorable life was ingrained in society. Early philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believed there was some moral good in the universe (represented by virtues like love, justice, honor, and fidelity) that the individual should align themselves with.

For boys, the ultimate realization of this would have been to die in battle for the good of your family, tribe, and clan—think Mel Gibson in *Braveheart* or Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. For girls, the ultimate realization of this would have been less exciting. You guessed it—the goal would have been to have a large family (preferably sons) and be a loving and submissive wife.

How was success determined in a traditional identity setting? Well, ultimately one needed the approval and affirmation of an outside authority, namely one's parents. Parents or a higher authority were the ones to say, "Well done. You have brought honor to the family."

MODERN IDENTITY

Somewhere along the way, a shift began to take place in the culture. In modern identity, the determiner of identity has moved from something outside of you to something inside of you. Your inner voice is now the decisive factor of determining who you are and what you want to be.

Nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill sums up the prevailing philosophy well: “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”⁷ The sovereign self is exactly that. You do you—you live your best life, an authentic life. In a modern identity context, the highest pursuit is the individual’s happiness and well-being, not the happiness or well-being of the family, tribe, or clan. To live an authentic life is seen as the highest good.

How did this shift happen? Well, it took place steadily post-Reformation. In the 1600s–1700s, Enlightenment thinkers like René Descartes and John Locke wrote that there is a moral good that we should align ourselves with; however, they didn’t go to the Bible or tradition to find or define it. No, they said we can rationally determine in our own minds what is right and wrong. Pushing the envelope further, Romantic thinkers like Jean Jacques Rousseau (1700s–1800s) wrote that it’s not just our reasoning that determines what is right and wrong—it’s our feelings. We have to dig deep into our feelings to determine what is good.

Rousseau writes, “The individual is at his best—he is most truly himself as he should be—when he acts in accordance with his nature.”⁸ Now, in our postmodern society we have taken this reasoning and accelerated the implications. Not only do we determine our own identity, we can conform and contort our physical bodies to align with what we perceive and feel ourselves to be. Feminist author Camille Paglia states it bluntly, “Fate, not God, has given us this flesh. We have absolute claim to our bodies and may do with them as we see fit.”⁹

Another way to trace the development of identity might be like this:

Traditional Identity	Identity is predetermined and earned
Modern Identity	Identity is discovered as you reason and feel it

HOW MODERN IDENTITY MAKES ITS WAY INTO OUR HOMES AND FAMILIES

As a father to four girls, I am well attuned to the magical world of Disney. From their theme parks to their movies to their global empire of products, Disney is a shaping influence for many. Now hear me rightly: I'm not anti-Disney or advocating for a boycott of Disney, but rather, I want to show you how the modern (postmodern?) process of identity formation we described above makes its way into our homes and into our children's hearts.

Take a moment and think with me about some well-known Disney characters. Take Elsa in *Frozen*, for instance. Elsa's parents die in a tragic storm and leave her to rule in their stead over the kingdom—a classic traditional identity paradigm. It doesn't matter what Elsa feels like doing, what she must do is what her parents tell her to do. Throughout the movie, Elsa feels this internal conflict deeply, but eventually her feelings about who she is ultimately win the day. In her breakout song, Elsa talks about breaking free. What is she exactly breaking free from? The old, traditional ways of constructing identity. She's tired of suppressing her true self; she wants to live out her true identity.

Another example is *Moana*, Disney's foray into the lovely world of Polynesia. Moana's parents have clear plans for her—rule the island in their stead—but Moana has other ideas. Moana wants to be an explorer. She wants to launch out on a boat and see what is beyond her tiny island. Similar to Elsa, Moana feels an internal conflict as well. The battle is between what her parents desire for her and what she feels she wants to be.

Moana could just play her expected role and fulfill her parents' wish for her and be who they want her to be. But her feelings and internal voice are telling her something different. She wonders what's wrong with her. Hopefully this isn't too much of a spoiler, but guess what Moana chooses? You got it. At the end of the day, Moana chooses her feelings and internal intuition.

Let's add another to this Disney duo with a final entry, for sake of illustration. In the newest, live-action remake of *Aladdin*, Jasmine's father, the sultan, wants her to get married to a handsome young prince—a very traditional course of action that would ultimately place her on the sidelines. But Jasmine doesn't want to. In one of the moments from the movie, Jasmine belts out that the old way of doing things is behind her, and now she is embracing her own voice. No longer is she going along with old-fashioned and antiquated rules and roles. She wants to be free to speak her mind.

Again, I'm not anti-Disney in any way, but simply want to show you how culture shapes and forms us through not only the upstream of academics and intellections, but also the downstream of movies, social media, literature, and art. The new understanding of identity is everywhere.

IS THERE A THIRD WAY?

As we will see, neither the traditional model nor the modern model works as the basis for a sure, godly identity. One process (traditional) puts all the power of identity into the hands of one's parents and family of origin, while the other process (modern) locates it solely with the individual. So what are we to do? The answer can't lie in a mushy amalgamation of traditional and modern identity, but a true third way. Who better to turn to in times when we need a true, stable, and secure word on who we are as individuals than the God who made heaven and earth, boy and girl.

We echo the words of Simon Peter who said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69).

As you read about modern identity, I'm confident you see some of the immediate concerns with this identity formation process, namely that it is rooted in one's own feelings and self-determination. You might be tempted to say something to the effect of, "See, that's why we need to get back to the old way

of doing things—a time when kids respected their elders and parents.” But we would err there too. While traditional identity has its positives, it has drawbacks too.

Timothy Keller writes, “The traditional self is suffocating, captive to what your family and tribe tell you that you must do. Adding some religion and moral structures only aggravates the problem.”¹⁰ Additionally, in a traditional identity formation system there is little to no room for the individual child to chart their own path that is different from that of their parents. What is wrong, for instance, if a child of a local farmer wants to be a teacher? Or if the young girl working at her parents’ store wants to head off to university to study and become an engineer? While the subjectivity and permissiveness of modern identity has its own set of problems (we’ll discuss five of them in the next chapter), the traditional identity formation process has its own pitfalls as well.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

What we need to pass on to our children, then, is neither an identity that they must earn from us (traditional) or an identity that they must create for themselves (modern), but an identity that is received and not achieved. A gospel identity comes from outside of us and relies on the unchanging, steadfast words of a God who is the final authority. We do nothing to earn God’s approval. He creates us in his image, redeems us from sin, and brings us into his family. The identity he gives us is bigger than ourselves, more permanent than anything we could ever imagine, and true today and forever regardless of our circumstances or situations.

Listen to the way Jesus frames this in Matthew 10:39: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” In modern identity our children are told to dig deep inside themselves to find themselves, and lo and behold, a generation is struggling in the end to find true meaning. The gospel, as it always does, turns things upside down. Jesus commands us to first lose our lives, and in losing our lives we ultimately find our identity in Christ.

What does Jesus mean when he speaks of losing our lives?

C. S. Lewis writes, “Give yourself up, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. . . . Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”¹¹ The late John Stott echoes Lewis: “The astonishing paradox of Christ’s teaching and of Christian experience is this: if we lose ourselves in following Christ, we actually find ourselves. True self-denial is self-discovery.”¹² In other words, when we focus our energies and passion on discovering what God has called us to do, our very identity often takes care of itself as we find our meaning and purpose in him. What an amazing truth that we can pass along and live out before our children.

Similarly, a gospel identity protects us and our children from pride and self-reliance. Christopher Watkins explains, “The fact that we are in the image of God and are not God therefore prevents us from thinking too highly of ourselves. It also prevents us from assuming the burden of defining ourselves. It reminds us that we are not the final court of appeal in questions about our own identity. . . . I do not ultimately own or define myself.”¹³

Do you see the freedom and the beauty of an identity that is received and not achieved? Do you see the relief that comes when we entrust our whole being to a sovereign, wise, and loving God? Here’s another way to see the three systems of identity formation compared to one another:

	Traditional	Modern	Gospel
Where does my identity come from?	Familial/ Societal: my parents, tribe, or clan.	Individual: I choose who I am.	God gets the final say on who I am.
Who gives it to you?	Chosen for you.	You choose it.	Given to you.
What is the goal?	Being an honorable or good person.	Being an authentic person.	Being who God designed me to be: an image-bearer of the living God.
Who validates who you are?	Parents (some sort of human higher authority)	You do	God
What constitutes the core of who you are?	You are what you do.	You are what you feel.	You are an image-bearer of the living God.
What do you do with feelings and emotions?	Ignore them and stuff them away.	You are your feelings.	Feelings are a part of God's good design, but they don't rule you.
How do you relate to the world you are embedded in?	Fit in with what is expected of you.	Stand out and be special.	Be on mission for Christ.

This chart helpfully summarizes the differences between these three identity formation processes. In the next chapter, we'll discuss in more depth some of the pitfalls and problems of the traditional and modern identity formation process.