

BOOK REVIEW

THE VERTICAL SELF

HOW BIBLICAL FAITH
CAN HELP US DISCOVER
WHO WE ARE IN AN AGE
OF SELF-OBSSESSION
MARK SAYERS

FOREWORD BY LEONARD SWEET

THE VERTICAL SELF:

How biblical faith can help us to discover who we are in an age of self obsession.

Mark Sayers, (2010). Thomas Nelson Publishing.

While reading his book *The Vertical Self*, Mark Sayers reminded me of the song *An Audience of One* written by singer songwriter Chris Wootton. Through the metaphor of life being a performance, Wootton encourages Christians that there need be only God in the concert hall of life and that a life sung to a large crowd does not reflect our true nature of

Sayers explains that the horizontal self has exchanged an authentic sense of identity with imagery. The horizontal self is constantly absorbed in the process of creating an image for others to the extent that this image creation becomes one's understanding of oneself. As a result (and this is particularly felt by young people), we are constantly feeling a sense of fragmentation and confusion as we create different identities in different contexts ("multiphrenia"). We become 'individuals who are captive to situations and circumstances out of our control'.

One of the great strengths of this book is the way Sayers sees anything other than a vertically defined sense of self to be a 'profoundly un-creational way of living'. He acknowledges that a biblical worldview understands that we are created by God and we are seen by him as 'very good' when we live with a perfectly vertically defined sense of self. Humanity's vertical sense of self has been distorted by the fall but it is redeemed in God's people through the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus; his death and resurrection. God created humans to partner with him in cultivating and blessing creation and in this task a significant component of our true identity can be found. This biblical worldview understanding is further developed in the second half of the book when the importance of holiness is explored. A strength of this book is the straight spoken exploration of holiness, our understanding of our 'future self', and how both are ultimately fulfilled in our unity with Christ: '[to] rediscover who we really are we must find the blueprint of who we are meant to be in the person of Christ'. (p 77)

Sayers' analysis of western culture and its impact on self identity is insightful. He suggests we are suffering from an identity crisis as a result of our culture not giving us foundation for building a healthy identity. The notion of our 'soul' has been replaced by a relentless focus on our image. When our image becomes our focus we become captive to situations and circumstances out of our control and we become lost in an identity crisis. This disorientation is not helped by the constant individualist cultural message of 'you're special'. In Sayers' exploration of cultural shaping forces he presents an insightful analysis of the trends toward idolising celebrity, sexification and the obsession with what it is to be 'cool'.

I commend this book to any Christian educator to help understand their students and how their students understand themselves. However, my guess is that you will be challenged yourself in how you construct your own identity; whether vertically defined or horizontally defined. Is your life being played out to an 'audience of one' or are you looking to other people, not as an opportunity to celebrate their made-in-his-imaginess but as mirrors to reflect back to you an image that you must present and perform?

being made in his image; a song and a book with a pertinent message to a self obsessed culture.

Sayers is described on the book cover as a thought leader in the areas of faith and culture and there is no doubt that he has written a well researched and insightful book that would be richly helpful for any Christian educator to read. He speaks of a profane identity crises being suffered by all in western cultural contexts with specific reference and applicability to young people.

Sayers begins by suggesting that despite the important discussions about the nature of church within our changing cultural landscape, it may be more urgent for us to be addressing the current crises of identity. Although we are all:

at a profoundly deep level being drawn, cajoled and beckoned by God to our true selves to find ourselves as God sees us: redeemed and perfect..., this desire in us is derailed and sabotaged by our culture, which offers imitations of our true identities – faux identities, pseudo selves, and images instead of the image of God.

We have cultivated a culture that deals in 'superficial imagery rather than our God-given image'. Sayers refer to the cultural shaping forces of scientific materialism, religious irrelevance, radical individualism, achievement obsession and an over emphasis on experience. He helpfully explains how they have resulted in us creating a horizontally defined sense of self rather than the God-created vertical self.

The vertically defined identity is one that is firmly founded in the knowledge that we have each been created by God and created in his image with the core aim in life to reflect back to him the glory of himself. The vertical self does not need the shaping influence of others for an authentic self image to be sustained. Western culture has moved us towards a horizontally defined sense of self and the vertical self has been shattered. We now look to our peers and society at large to be our image consultants and to create for us an ever changing notion of who we are in their eyes.

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