

Who do you say that I am?

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I often wonder what Jesus was getting at when he asked his disciple “Who do you say that I am?” Was Jesus testing the waters, trying to figure out if the people and his friends understood the nature of his divinity? Was he trying to figure out if his rabble rousing was about to get him killed? Was he concerned with how his identity was formed by the community? Or was he just wondering what people thought about him?

Whatever the motivation, Jesus was concerned with what other people were saying about him. He was taking an opinion poll. He was vanity googling.

I was with a group of Christian writers and leaders recently, and I had some fascinating conversations. Many (perhaps most) of them revolved around identity. In this digital age, when accolades are quickly garnered and criticisms are easily spewed, how does this all affect who we are and who we become? There was concern that we don’t see one another as human—instead we’re just a collection of pixels and text—and so people don’t treat one another with the same dignity and respect.

I spent most of the time anxious about my “brand,” because I know I’m supposed to have some intentionality about that, but I don’t really know who I am. I mean, I understand who I am in relation to my family, friends, and colleagues but not in the other spaces.

With a preteen in the house, I’m often thinking about how the Internet culture will affect her self-identity. Most preteens and children do not put their names or any personal information on the Internet. Instead, they have a pseudonym. And so they write fan fiction, review books, create digital drawings—all under a nickname.

Does a name matter? What is it like to grow up with two identities—one on-line and another in-person? Do terms like “friends” or “followers” cheapen relationships at that age? How will the act of continually constructing identities (setting up Facebook

sites, putting together Twitter bios, interacting in social reading) affect how a person sees herself?

These are the questions I wrestle with as I watch her develop. Sometimes when I think about the sexualizing of teens on the Internet or when she catches a glimpse of something nasty a person (usually another Christian) says about me, I think it would be smart to ban the computer from the house and live off the grid. But, then I remember that it's good for girls to get the tools and resources for computer competency, since so much of one's livelihood depends on it these days.

And so we muddle around in the midst of all of it, hoping in this confusing time, we can be reminded by our spiritual communities—whether they are on-line or in person—that we are beloved.