



## TODAY IN GOD'S WORD

*"Who Are We?", Relational Imperative pt 2*

Genesis 4:1-24

May 7, 2006

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### ESSAY

After days of rain, there was finally a clear day. I found myself sitting in the café at Barnes & Nobles, watching the people around me. This is something I find myself doing more and more often. The ways people interact, the relationships they share fascinate me.

An older gentleman, a traveling salesman, met up with some of his fellow salespeople in the fiction and literature section. He was neatly dressed, but not overly flashy. Plainly well-traveled and with a paunch that indicated too little time for exercise, he discusses business with a short woman probably in her fifties.

They are joined by a taller, blond man dressed in a sports jacket and khakis. They talk about architecture and Chinese bookstores as they order their chai teas and muffins and take the table closest to me. The older man talks with authority on a number of subjects. He talks with his hands, and I find myself listening to him. He is in charge of the group and knows it.

Occasionally, he or one of the others mentions something personal. The direction of conversation stops abruptly and someone identifies awkwardly with the point, then they shift back to business.

Two women at the table down the railing from me work for Mary Kay – or one of those kinds of things. They are all business, talking about conventions and that woman Mary who made a million dollars in sales and whether they would be on the platform at the next big event. Their conversation is just not interesting.

If people aren't meeting others, they are on their cell phone or very quiet. None of the regulars are here who I usually see; they all arrive a little later in the day anyway. On the far end of the café, there are two unattached individuals reading books. They have cut themselves off from the rest of us.

There's a man in a striped shirt leaning against one of the trash cans. He's been on his cell phone for twenty minutes, and shows no signs of stopping. He keeps his keys in his left hand, nervously twirling them. He must be dealing with something important. He heads into the cookbook section and out of the store – without having ordered a drink. Another man, newspaper in hand, arrives. They cross paths but don't share glances. His clothes aren't ironed, probably a bachelor. He orders a brownie, bending over to look at the case and revealing the patterned black t-shirt he's wearing under his rumpled dress shirt.

Down on the lower level are four or five college age girls supposedly studying for something, but as I eavesdrop on their conversation, I realize they are actually swapping tattoo stories. They're the only social group I see. Their conversation is superficial though. They're not dealing with the matters of life. All that concerns them is body art. I didn't even know there

were books on tattoos nonetheless patterns for Buddhas you could have tattooed onto unmentionable parts of the body.

The milk delivery guy shows up. He doesn't fit in at all. His red hair is pulled back into a pony-tail that falls down to the middle of his back in a slow wave. He's dressed in the clothes of a delivery man, a laborer. Somehow, he just looks out of place. He doesn't speak to anyone except for a casual remark about his presence and handing the manager the invoice

There's a young guy sitting right next to me with a new prosthesis. He is still learning how to use it and it still itches. He keeps scratching. What is his story? He wears a military haircut and is uncomfortable in this setting, concerned that people are watching him. We all pretend that we aren't, but we are. We all ask the same questions of the voice we imagine he has. One wonders if he is answering the questions we're not asking. Regardless of what's going on inside our heads, he just stays focused on his book.

A young Asian couple enters the place with an older white woman. The Asian woman is pregnant. She carries a manila folder in one hand while her husband scans the café for something. I think he's looking for the bathroom. IT would probably be easier to find if he took off his sunglasses. His wife takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. She has that haggard look shared by all pregnant women.

Everyone else here is like me – individuals in a large cloud of otherness. A woman in a driving cap and jeans comes in right next to a business man in a blue oxford shirt who is carrying a laptop case. They stand right next to each other in line as well, but don't seem to notice. The guy in the oxford shirt is looking for the bathroom. He would not have thought to ask, but I sit here so much that I can tell the look. I point him in the general direction and he thanks me. It's a polite thank you, but one of habit rather than of sincere acceptance of grace.

The girl in the driving hat still has her sunglasses on. I bet she had a long night. She even carries on a pretty decent discussion with the café manager before walking off with her iced-mocha something or other. He's a friendly guy, good at his job.

As I reflect on his presence, I think about Raven and wonder where she's gotten to. Raven used to work here. She wore her hair in multiple, subtle colorations – long strands in front of her ears but cut short in the back. She was a nice person and always courteous to me when I bought a coffee, but I haven't seen her here for a couple of weeks. I would ask if she still works here, but I know I won't. There's an invisible line between worker and customer that you do not cross in our culture.

While the counter vends mocha café lattes and double chocolate chip cookies, they are blissfully unaware that they are the descendants of the London coffee houses that gave birth to some of the greatest institutions of the Western world – the West India Company, Lloyd's of London. English and American cultures were transformed over cups of coffee, and yet there is nothing of that greatness here. We have become a disjointed, unconnected society.

Although there are people everywhere, they are all in different places. We share this space, but we are separated by light years. Our entire world is transient, and we do not get attached. What should be a place of fellowship and community is just a place to get an overpriced coffee flavored beverage.

So I'm packing up my mobile office. I realize that I am one of the most connected people I know. I have wi-fi internet just about everywhere I go, a cell phone that I sometimes don't answer but is always nearby. I write more emails, blogs and forum posts in a day than most people will write in a month. My entire calling is centered on the idea of being able to connect with people. Communication is what I do.

And yet, there's something that should be there that isn't. Like the guy with the military haircut, I've got an itch where something I should have is missing. It's not my leg that's missing, but it may be just as or even more important than that. I feel like we are all walking around on prosthetic identities. We don't know who we are but we're not who we want to be. We're getting by on the prosthesis, but there's definitely something wrong.

### **Who Are We?**

Not who we appear to be...who ARE we?

1. ARE WE WHO THEY SAY WE ARE?
  - a. Who are *they* in the first place? And why does their opinion matter so much?
  - b. In Cain's case, there really wasn't a *they* because it was just him and his parents.
  - c. I take out my driver's license and show you a picture with accompanying personal information. Does my driver's license make me who I am? Does your knowledge of me?
  - d. ILL: Exodus 32:1-25 – Moses on Sinai; "Aaron had not restrained them."
    - i. Aaron knew everything Moses knew; he had performed miracles, etc.
    - ii. Aaron listened to *them* and defined himself according to their expectations
    - iii. He is following those who should be following him.
2. ARE WE WHO I SAY WE ARE? (v 3)
  - a. NOTICE – *Cain brought the offering* and then Abel. Cain did it first.
  - b. Much of the wisdom of this world revolves around the idea of self-determination – knowing what you want and obtaining it.
  - c. Am I looking for affirmation rather than acceptance? *Cain was looking for God to bless what he does instead of looking for God's blessing.*

3. ARE WE WHO YOU SAY WE ARE? (v 19-24)

- a. From Cain to Lamech – by the time we get to Cain's descendant Lamech, the curse God put on Cain was viewed as a BLESSING. He proves to his wives how GOOD he is by killing more than Cain.
- b. When I walk through the mall, I see all kinds of people trying to gauge who they are by your reactions to them. Some are dressed like freaks, and others are wearing coats and ties – but in reality, they're heart is the same. They are looking for you to *appreciate* them.
- c. They derive their value from how they are perceived by others. The obsession with sensuality that drives our culture is demeaning to everyone involved and yet we thrive on it. THIS IS THE WAY WE OBTAIN ACCEPTANCE.
- d. And before too long, NOTICE takes the place of acceptance.
- e. An interesting thought – God loves the godless more than he loves the godly.

4. WHO DECIDES WHO WE ARE?

- a. The LORD says to Cain: "Hey! Sin lies at the door, but you should rule over it. It wants to take over your life." What was he saying?
- b. Righteousness is not about *obtaining* or even *obeying* – it is about restored relationship with God. Cain wanted to define his relationship with God rather than the other way around.
- c. Cain tries to define his relationship with God and gets frustrated when it doesn't work. He tries to define his relationship with Abel on his own terms. Cain was desperately trying to do for himself what God wanted to do in his life.
- d. I need someone external to me to tell me who I am. God is that external identifier. My relationship with him defines all of my other relationships.

*When God defines you, you're defined. When God identifies you, you're identified.*

- i. He defined who man was and defined who woman was.
- ii. When the world saw Jacob, God saw Israel.