Society and Nation

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to Hope Lab on Society and Nation. For those of you who don't know me....Lausanne, ECM, ANCC, Vista.

As we all know, God's redemptive plan is not only about personal salvation but also the building of God's New Society in the world. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say "Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...on earth as it is in heaven".

This Hope Lab will explore three big issues that are impacting our societies and nations, the issues of identity, polarisation, and nationalism. We will have 20-25 minutes of input from a speaker and then the rest of the time will be for discussion in small groups around the theme. We know that you have a lot to share on these topics.

Goals for all the sessions

- that all participants leave with a better understanding of these crucial issues, and the ideasthat are influencing them.

- that all participants leave having been equipped with some theological resources to continue to reflect on these issues.

- that all participants leave more able to discuss these issues with others in the future.

Today, I will look at the issue of identity, tomorrow Olof Edsinger the Director of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance will talk on polarisation, and then on Thursday Roman Soloviy, the Chair of the Eastern European Institute of Theology, will speak on nationalism. In no way will these be exhaustive treatments of the topics, but we hope they will open up for a meaningful discussion.

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20 mins

1. Intro: Who am I?

Identity is undoubtedly one of the key concepts of our time. For centuries, identity was a word that rarely broke out of the classrooms of logic and philosophy. Today, the word is everywhere. Coulmas, the author of the Oxford Very Short Introduction on the topic, called it an "obsession with identity".

Our national, ethnic, or cultural identity, our gender identity, not to mention our virtual identity, these and many, many more aspects overlap and conflict within each of us, and perhaps more importantly, with those around us. For defining who we are requires us to define who we are not. In fact, that is the engine of all identity projects, a constant comparison with others to affirm who we are against the other.

Yet this self-referential way of defining our identity fragments us. Identity politics ends up eating itself, as we see with gender identity and its proliferation of LGBTQI+ flags. But I don't want that issue to be the focus today. I use it merely as an example of the dead end so many people find themselves in today when their identity depends on their choices.

So even secular philosophers are starting to push back against this. So you find books like this one I read recently, Against Identity, by the Australian philosopher Alexander Douglas.

Douglas comes to the conclusion that obsession is killing us. He notes that, although we tell ourselves that we are free to define who we are, in practice our identity comes from the observation of others through a process called mimesis. We define who we are by defining who others are.

2. So How did we get here?

The Christian philosopher Carl Truman argues that our obsession with identity is the result of what he calls Expressive Individualism – the idea that every individual has a unique core of feelings and intuitions that must be expressed for us to truly be ourselves.

Illustrate this I want to tell you a personal story – grandfather was a shoemaker. My unusual surname , advantage for family history research, one hundred years back most people didn't move much, easy to trace my ancestors, six generations of shomakers right back to 18th C.

If I asked my grandfather, who are you? He would have said, I am the son of David Memory who was a member of the shoemaker's guild of Leicester.

And if I followed that up with the question, do you get satisfaction from your job, firstly he would have thought it was a strange question, but then would almost certainly have answered: well I get paid enough to feed my family and to meet my other obligations so yes.

Now if you were to ask me that question, Jim do you get satisfaction from your job, I would say yes, I really enjoy working with Usha and connecting leaders with Lausanne and ECM.

My grandfathers' answer was all about his obligations to others, our answers are about our psychological satisfaction. My grandfathers identity was about his relationship and responsibility to others. Mine is about how I feel. That is expressive individualism.

So how did we get here. Well in the Middle Ages identity was wrapped up with roles and relationships – industrial revolution changed that, breaking of social bonds.

Rousseau ideas that man is free but everywhere in chains – relationships are a limitation on our freedom – ultimately corrupt us

Romantics – idealisation of freedom – freedom to be me – idea of the inner world as sovereign

Freud – inner space is the core of our identity – whereas Rousseau saw the self as pristine for Freud the inner world was dark and dominated by sexuality. Trueman put it "with Freud sex becomes something you are rather than something you do">

Technology – ability to manipulate the environment around us. We are able to exert our will over the world and even our bodies, shaping them to our liking.

Result has been a desperate insecurity – we don't know who we are any more. Find ourselves in a world where we are obsessed with identity but also desperately insecure about it.

3. An Evangelical Identity?

What does it mean to be an evangelical Christian? How do you answer that question?

Bible-believing, born-again, point to theological distinctives…

When the historian David Bebbington first presented his schema of Evangelical distinctives back in 1989, I am sure he never expected it to become so well known and widely used. The Bebbington Quadrilateral provides a historical definition of what an evangelical has been, and has been increasingly used as a sociological definition as well, providing definitional characteristics of what an evangelical is today.

However, words change their meaning over time, and what it means to be an evangelical has evolved significantly. As a result our identity as evangelicals has been shifting.

In essence there has been a process of association and disassociation.

The association has occurred primarily in the USA, where the word evangelical has become more and more of a synonym an allegiance with right-wing politics. In effect, evangelical is becoming another word for republican.

Last month there were elections for the regional parliament in Saxony-Anhalt in former East Germany, and one of the political parties of the left Die Linke has this in its election manifesto: ""religious fundamentalism, whether of a Christian-evangelical or jihadist nature, must be firmly combated through intervention, awareness-raising, prevention and civil society initiatives".

- Disassociation with the word in Europe

EA Research in the UK – two slides

Questions based on Bebbington – broad survey

Belief Evangelicals and Identity Evangelicals – disassociation and association

4. Identity in Christ

Identity, Polarisation and Nationalism, the three issues that are our focus this week, are all relativised and redefined by the gospel. For the cross of Christ has transformed our identity and transferred us into a new family.

We are now In Christ. Personal identity – anyone who is in Christ has a new identity, a new understanding of themselves: "Therefore, if anyone is in

Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" 2 Corinthians 5:17

We are also In Community: New Family Identity. We are not meant to understand ourselves as only ourselves, but in relation to others. Ubuntu "I am because we are". "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:27

We are In-ternational: we belong to a bigger family than just our tribe. For this is how the story ends. "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Revelation 7:9

Questions for Discussion

What are the consequences in society and in our churches of our current obsession with identity?

What are the essential features of our Evangelical identity?

What Scriptural and theological resources can help us in this identity-obsessed age and how can we serve our churches by wrestling with this issue in our preaching and discipleship?