

SESSION 1

OVERCOMING THE LABELS THAT BIND YOU

World conditions are constantly at work eroding the high profile specifics of each person into a flat and featureless generality, identified by label: Introvert, Elder Material, Ectomorph, Unsaved, Anorexic, Bipolar, Single Parent, Diabetic, Tither, Left-brained. The labels are marginally useful for understanding some aspect of the human condition, but the moment they are used to identify a person, they obscure . . . the unprecedented, unrepeatable soul addressed by God.

EUGENE H. PETERSON, *SUBVERSIVE SPIRITUALITY*

Welcome (5 Minutes)

Welcome to Session 1 of *Altar Ego*. If this is your first time together as a group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to each other before watching the video. Then let's get started!

Video: Overcoming the Labels that Bind You (12 Minutes)

Play the video segment for Session 1. As you watch, use the accompanying outline to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

Negative labels: You are not who others say you are.

God's truth is bigger than other people's opinions about you.

An altar ego is who God says you are.

Two helpful thoughts to establish a God-centered view:

1. God can give you a new *name*.

“You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow” (Isaiah 62:2).

You will grow into your new name.

2. God will give you a new *purpose*.

Simon means unpredictable, unstable, unfaithful. Jesus gave Simon the new name Peter, which means rock.

God often takes our greatest weakness and makes it our greatest strength.

It's time for you to become who God says you are.

Group Discussion (40 Minutes)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

The Labeled Life

2. Briefly recall a few of the people you encountered in the last day or two — family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, restaurant or store staff, strangers you passed in your daily travels, etc.
 - What labels went through your mind as you encountered these people? Consider positive, negative, and neutral labels. For example: team player (positive), freeloader (negative), clerk (neutral).
 - What similarities and differences do you see between the labels you applied to people over the last day or two and the labels you imagine these same people may have applied to you?
 - When you think about any negative labels you may have for people you know well, what makes it especially difficult for you to let those labels go or to see the “unprecedented, unrepeatabe soul” behind the label?

3. Craig described struggling with two kinds of labels: idealized, people-pleasing labels like *good son* and *good student*; and negative, confining labels like *tightwad* and *Scrooge*. He failed to live up to the idealized labels and couldn't seem to live down the negative ones.
 - What labels come to mind when you think about your own struggles? For example, what idealized images have you wanted people to believe about you so you could fit in and win approval? What negative characterizations have left you feeling trapped by past behavior?

 - How have these idealized or negative labels — which are largely about how others see you — impacted the way you see yourself? For example, how might they have led to self-defeating thought patterns that keep you stuck or mental labels that you use to beat yourself up?

Altar Ego

4. The alternative to a labeled life is an *altar ego*. Developing an altar ego requires sacrificing false labels in order to discover your true identity in Christ. The apostle Paul describes how this happens in his letter to the church at Colossae:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place

of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1 – 3 NLT).

When Paul writes that our real life is “hidden,” he uses the Greek word *krypto*. *Krypto* is the root word for several English words, including the word “encrypt,” which means to encode and make secret. Encryption is a form of protection — it guards sensitive information by making it inaccessible to anyone who doesn't have the key to unlock the code.

- How does the idea of encryption help you to understand what it might mean that your real life — your true identity — is “hidden with Christ in God”?

- Why do you think God hides your true identity? From whom or from what might your true identity need to be protected?

- How would you describe the decoding “key,” the means of accessing and understanding your true identity?

5. In the Bible, an *altar* is a place where people encounter God — primarily through sacrifice and worship. An *ego* is an identity — the unique collection of thoughts, feelings, traits, and behaviors that makes you *you*.
- Briefly describe your associations with altars or any personal experiences you have of altars (for example, in your church or a cathedral you visited). Are these associations and experiences mostly positive or negative, meaningful or insignificant, recent or distant, etc.?
 - How have experiences of personal sacrifice — intentional decisions to surrender something important to you — shaped your identity? For example, consider time, resources, or something of yourself that you have willingly surrendered to God or offered to others. How did these willing subtractions influence your outlook, values, or decisions?
 - Based on your associations with altars and your experiences of personal sacrifice, what intrigues you or concerns you about pursuing what Craig describes as an *altar ego*?

A New Name

6. An altar ego is a God-centered identity — one we both receive as a gift and grow into over time. A biblical example is the apostle Peter, whose given name was Simon. The name Simon means unpredictable, unstable, unfaithful — and it was an accurate

reflection of Simon's impulsive character. But the very first thing Jesus does when he meets Simon is rename him:

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter) (John 1:42).

Both names (Cephas is Aramaic and Peter is Greek) mean *rock*, the precise opposite of wishy-washy Simon. In essence, Jesus says, *I see you. I know who you are right now. And I know a deeper truth about who you really are.*

- Before giving Simon a new name, Jesus could easily have said, "You are *no longer* Simon." Instead, Jesus says, "You *are* Simon." How would you describe the differences in these two statements? What potential significance is there in the way Jesus chooses to make the statement?

 - If Jesus were to address one of the above statements to you before giving you a new name, which one would you want him to say — *You are ...* or *You are no longer ...*? Why?

 - Using John 1:42 as a reference, how would you characterize the similarities and differences between a label and an identity?
7. The four remaining sessions in *Altar Ego* take a deeper look at how we can overcome the obstacles that keep us from living out our true identity in Christ. In addition to learning together as a group, it's important to be aware of how God is at work among

you — especially in how you relate to each other and share your lives throughout the study. As you discuss the teaching in each session, there will be many opportunities to speak life-giving — and life-challenging — words, and to listen to one another deeply.

Take a few moments to consider the kinds of things that are important to you in this setting. What do you need or want from the other members of the group? Use one or more of the sentence starters below, or your own statement, to help the group understand the best way to speak life and truth to you. As each person responds, use the two-page chart that follows to briefly note what is important to that person and how you can be a good companion to them.

It really helps me when ...

I tend to withdraw when ...

I'll know this group is a safe place if you ...

In our discussions, the best thing you could do for me is ...

NAME	THE BEST WAY I CAN COMPANION THIS PERSON IS ...

NAME	THE BEST WAY I CAN COMPANION THIS PERSON IS ...

Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember (2 Minutes)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session — from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session ...

Closing Prayer

Close your time together with prayer.

Personal Study

● Read and Learn

Read “To the Reader” and chapter 1 of the *Altar Ego* book. Use the space below to note any insights or questions you want to bring to the next group session.

● Study and Reflect

My ego, that self-constructed identity I worked so hard to build, came from a twisted combination of my accomplishments and other people’s opinions of me.

Altar Ego, pages 8–9

1. Embracing an altar ego — the person God says we are — requires letting go of false labels that limit and obscure our true identity. Often these labels come in one of two forms: idealized labels and negative labels.

Idealized labels represent the carefully crafted version of ourselves we work hard to create and present to the world for affirmation and approval. For example, Craig described in the group session how in high school he tried hard to present himself as successful — as a good student, a good son, a good athlete.

Negative labels are typically a legacy of the past. They might be labels we earned through a pattern of regrettable behavior or things that other people have attached to us over the years through no fault of our own. For example, Craig described how his extreme and sometimes deceptive penny-pinching ways earned him labels like *tightwad* and *Scrooge*.

Use the following lists to reflect on any idealized and negative labels that may have shaped your identity. In each list, check two

or three labels you identify with, or write in your own label if nothing on the lists seems right.

Idealized Labels

It's important to me that other people see me as . . .

- Caring.** I am helpful, generous, and tuned in to others.
- Successful.** I am industrious, self-motivated, and optimistic.
- Unique.** I am creative, drawn to beauty, and feel things deeply.
- Wise.** I am perceptive, independent, and hungry for knowledge.
- Loyal.** I am supportive, reliable, and committed.
- Fun.** I am spontaneous, adventurous, and joyful.
- Influential.** I am strong, decisive, and protective.
- Easygoing.** I am open-minded, pleasant, and accepting.
- Good.** I am honest, idealistic, and self-disciplined.
- Other: _____

Negative Labels

I feel like I sometimes have a reputation for being . . .

- Prideful.** I can be manipulative, possessive, and insecure.
- Deceitful.** I can be phony, competitive, and self-absorbed.
- Dissatisfied.** I can be envious, self-doubting, and easily hurt.
- Greedy.** I can be withdrawn, arrogant, and stingy.
- Fearful.** I can be suspicious, self-defeating, and hyper-vigilant.
- Self-indulgent.** I can be impulsive, self-destructive, and unfocused.
- Aggressive.** I can be controlling, vindictive, and insensitive.
- Lazy.** I can be apathetic, passive-aggressive, and defensive.
- Angry.** I can be dogmatic, judgmental, and perfectionistic.
- Other: _____

Of the labels you checked, which ones would you say you struggle with most? Circle or highlight one label on each list.

What negative self-talk are you aware of in connection with these labels? For example, *I'm such a loser; I'll never be successful. No one will like me if I'm not funny. I'm worthless. I can't change.*

How do these labels and negative thought patterns tend to keep you stuck or leave you feeling disempowered?

You were made for more than you've settled for. You know your life does not reflect who you really are deep down inside.

Altar Ego, page 19

2. A false identity can become a safe haven of sorts. It protects us from the risk of growth and change with a lie that essentially says, *All of these labels are not only true about you, they are what is most true about you. They are undeniable, irreversible, and unchallengeable. This is who you are and always will be.* To get a picture of what this looks like, read the personal story Craig Groeschel shares in “The Safety of a False Identity” (see box that follows question 2). Then respond to the questions below.

Keeping in mind your responses to question 1 above, what label or issue is most likely to make you “settle” and think something like, “That’s just who I am.”

Craig became convinced that Amy’s self-identification with being average was a lie. What potential lies do you recognize in the label you identified?

Settling for mediocrity kept Amy safe. She didn't have to work hard, risk failure, or take responsibility for developing her gifts. How do you recognize this need for safety in yourself? What is the hard work you might be avoiding, the failure you're afraid of risking, or the gifts you resist taking responsibility to develop?

The Safety of a False Identity

So often we cling to the safety of a familiar, false identity rather than extend ourselves to grasp who we really are. People tell us we're shy so we never allow ourselves to take risks to meet new people and become more social; we retreat into our safe refrain of "that's just who I am." Or they tell us we're funny and always expect us to crack a joke or deliver a witty punch line, never challenging us to use the intellect behind that humor for something more substantive.

I observed this phenomenon—and challenged it—when I first met my wife Amy over twenty-two years ago when she was a sophomore in college. Beyond her love for God, I was immediately impressed with her quick wit and sharp mind. So imagine my shock when one day Amy casually mentioned that she was just an average student. Average student? I remember thinking, *There is nothing average about this girl!* So I pushed back, arguing with assurance that she wasn't average at all.

Amy didn't budge on her self-proclamation of mediocrity. She dismissed my observation as the product of infatuation

or misguided flattery. When I tried to discern why she felt this way about herself, she explained that everyone—her parents, her teachers, her friends—always told her she was a middle-of-the-road student. For as long as she could remember, everyone agreed that she wasn't at the bottom of the class and would never find herself at the top. Making mostly B's and a handful of C's only confirmed the only-average label.

After several more months of getting to know Amy even better, I became thoroughly convinced that she believed a lie. With a burden that I felt came from God, I sat Amy down and looked her in the eye. I told her as boldly as I could, "Just because everyone else says something and even believes it, doesn't make it true. You are not average. God made you very, very bright."

Amy's eyes almost glazed over as she instinctively brushed me off. Unfazed, I firmly but lovingly held both sides of her face and said, "Listen to me. I believe God wants you to hear this. Hear it as him speaking, not me. God did not make you average. You have greatness inside of you. It's time to act like it."

Her eyes teared and locked with mine. Something changed at that moment. Instead of seeing herself as others saw her, I believe Amy saw herself as God saw her. She started her next semester, not as Amy-the-Average, but with a new God-given name: Amy-the-Brilliant. If my story sounds a little cheesy or overly dramatic, the results speak for themselves. For the first time ever, Amy made a 4.0—all A's. With a new, God-given self-image, she never made anything lower than an A for the rest of her college studies. . . .

What's true about you now doesn't have to be true about you later. The goal is not to reinvent yourself by striving to be some perfect person but to allow God to do an extreme makeover by uncovering your true self in his image, redeemed through Christ. What once was—no longer has to be. God can and will break the labels that have held you hostage.

Altar Ego, pages 21–23

3. An altar ego is a God-centered identity grounded in a relationship with Christ. It is your true self—no labels, no lies. Every Christ follower receives it as a gift, but it also requires something of us. Here is how Jesus explained it to his disciples:

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it (Matthew 16:24–25 NLT).

Consider this passage again from *The Message*:

Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self (Matthew 16:24–25 MSG).

If becoming your true self in Christ requires self-sacrifice, what might you need to let go of—either in connection to the labels you identified or in any area of your life?

How do you respond to the image of embracing this sacrifice rather than running from it? What might it mean to do this?

● Guided Prayer

God, thank you for giving me a new identity — a true identity — in you. That is the person I want to be. I know that requires letting go of some labels — idealistic ones and negative ones. A label I'm really struggling with right now is ... This is hard for me because ...

I also know I need to step out of the safety of my false identity and take some risks. I sense you may be challenging me to ... I ask that you help me ...

God, more than anything, I want to let you lead. I'm tired of trying to hang on to life just as it is. Give me the courage I need to give up my life so I can find my true self in you. Amen.

