

EXCERPT



## **You Are Not Your Own** *Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*

September 28, 2021 | \$22, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4782-2

Alan Noble diagnoses our society's fundamentally skewed anthropology. Our culture's creed, he says, is radical self-definition, "I am my own," and much of our current social upheaval can be traced back to that source. Noble replaces that anthropology by drawing on the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is your only comfort in life and death?"

## What Is Your Only Comfort in Life and Death?

This is the fundamental lie of modernity: that we are our own. Until we see this lie for what it is and work to uproot it from our culture and replant a conception of human persons as not being our own but belonging to God, most of our efforts at improving the world will be glorified Band-Aids.

The first question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism reads:

**Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?**

**A. That I am not my own,  
but belong with body and soul,  
both in life and in death,  
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.**

A proper understanding of our personhood requires that we recognize that we are not our own. At our core, we belong to Christ. This doesn't just mean that we give mental allegiance to Christ or that we discover our true identity in Christ. The truth is deeper and more complex and more beautiful than these phrases convey. For one thing, our understanding of *identity* tends to be distorted by modern conceptions of image and representation. To belong to Christ is to find our existence in his grace, to live transparently before God. And this belonging to Christ necessarily entails belonging to his body, the church, and to our families and neighbors. An anthropology defined by our belonging to God is diametrically opposed to the contemporary belief that we are autonomous, free, and atomistic individuals who find our greatest fulfillment in breaking free from all external norms. Our selves belong to God, and we are joyfully limited and restrained by the obligations, virtues, and love that naturally come from this belonging. This living before God, as the nineteenth-century Dutch philosopher Kierkegaard describes it, is not easy. It requires sacrifice and humility, perpetual repentance and dependence on Christ. In a secular age such as our own, it requires an intentional effort to remember that we belong to Christ, and that belonging is not merely a doctrine but a reality that touches every aspect of our lives.

Maybe the cure sounds worse than the disease. If our lives are not our own, are we not enslaved? Isn't that the definition of a loss of freedom? Perhaps nothing seems worth that price. In the coming chapters we'll explore that possibility. For now, allow me to show how the belief that we are our own fundamentally forms our inhuman society. Then we can consider the alternative: accepting and embracing our belonging to Christ, which unites us with him and gives us the ground to delight in this world even as we work to make it more human.

No significant idea in this book is original. Some ideas I learned from wiser people than myself, some I came to on my own and later discovered in others' writing. But nothing here is really original. And that not false modesty—it's a comment on the nature of the problem.



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**Alan Noble** (PhD, Baylor University) is assistant professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University and cofounder and editor in chief of Christ and Pop Culture. He has written for *The Atlantic*, *Vox*, *BuzzFeed*, *The Gospel Coalition*, *Christianity Today*, and *First Things*. He is also an advisor for the AND Campaign.

The basic idea that the modern world makes us ill and that part of that illness comes from individualism, technocracy, and consumerism has been explored in detail since at least the Second World War. Theologians, sociologists, poets, musicians, politicians, historians, and philosophers have all made these points. And yet, here we are. Here we remain.

There remains the fight to recover what has been lost, for we have lost it. Or at the very least, we have not taken advantage of the wisdom of those great minds who came before us. What I hope this work contributes is to recontextualize the argument in the twenty-first century and to think specifically in terms of self-ownership and self-belonging, from which I believe a number of our problems stem.

Despite the fact that this cultural critique is old and fairly uncontroversial, little, very very little has changed. And it does feel less likely to change now than fifty or one hundred years ago; the conditions “seem unpropitious.” But as Eliot says, I am not responsible for changing the world or even for creating something “original.” My responsibility is to address what I believe to be one of the most pressing issues for my community. And so, I’ll try. How successful I am is not my business; although, I suppose it is yours. Please like and subscribe.

A final note, I did not write this book as a critic positioned safely outside of society. It is very much the product of someone living within society, affected by the same problems, tempted by the same desires, and burdened by the same anxieties as those I describe. There is a popular genre of nonfiction in which the author recounts their personal journey from a bad life to a good one, a disorganized life to an organized one, depressed to happy, cluttered to decluttered, lazy to driven, poor to wealthy, out of shape to fit, and so on.

This is not that book, and I am no guru. Follow Christ. Follow in the footsteps of wise, righteous elders in your life. And have grace for everyone. Lord knows we all need it.

—Adapted from the introduction

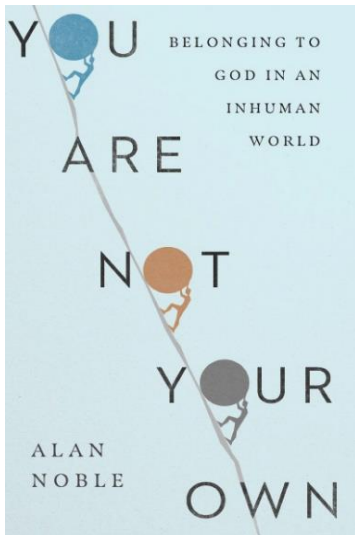


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## Q & A



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“I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

—The Heidelberg Catechism

## What Is Your Only Comfort in Life and Death?

How is the modern world “sick”?

**Alan Noble:** Our contemporary society is not built for humans as we truly are. It is based on a false conception of what it means to be a human. Specifically, the design of our society assumes that we are all our own, which means that we are individually responsible for living a full and meaningful life, for defining our identity, for interpreting meaning, for choosing our values, and for finding a space to belong. These responsibilities are overwhelming. As a result, we live under expectations that are unreasonable and inhuman, which makes us sick. One person may suffer from the constant pressure to define themselves via social media. Another person may experience the crushing burden of striving for “success.” But always we end up feeling inadequate and burned out. To cope with these feelings, we self-medicate through binge watching TV shows or exercising or endlessly scrolling through social media or substance abuse, and so on. And each of these coping mechanisms is a technique society gives us to deal with the inhuman conditions of society that come from not understanding what it fundamentally means to be a human being. When you live in an environment that is not designed for you, you will become sick.

**You say that the fundamental lie of modernity is this: that we are our own. Why is it so important that we address this lie?**

**Alan:** The most dangerous lies are the ones that we believe so deeply that we cannot even see them. They feel so intuitively true that they go unquestioned. In the modern world, the lie that human beings are only ever their own is responsible for many of the unbearable obligations we experience—for example, the duty to always be productive or always be optimizing our lives. But because it is so widely taught and believed in, it feels natural. Everyone is responsible for living a life of meaning and purpose. That’s just the way it is. When we see this as a lie, we can resist these responsibilities and remove some of the burden of modern life. Of course, the world will continue to treat us as sovereign individuals, but if we know it’s a lie we have some agency to resist it.

**What hope does the Heidelberg Catechism provide for our society?**

**Alan:** The first question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism is: “What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Most modern people cringe at these words. Belonging to someone else sounds like a recipe for abuse, and yet this catechism teaches that it is our only comfort. Here’s how we can understand that: If the sickness of modern life comes from the impossible burden of having to justify and belong to ourselves, then the knowledge that we belong to God frees us. Rather than endless striving to be good enough, we can rest in God’s grace and be grateful.

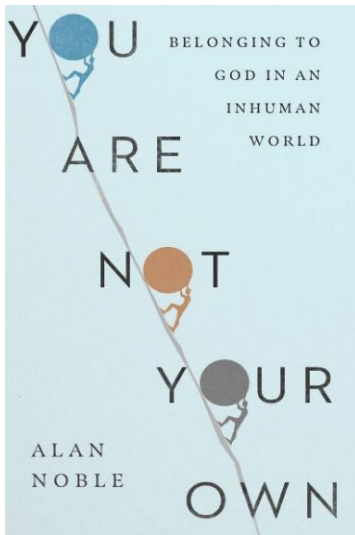


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—Alan Noble

**Practically speaking, what does *You Are Not Your Own* look like for each of us on a daily basis?**

**Alan:** It means identifying when society places unrealistic expectations on us. It means treating others as image bearers. It means prodigal living—delighting in the goodness of God and his creation even if it isn't “productive.” It means committing to our friendships, marriages, churches, and communities rather than treating them as optional bonds that can be broken whenever we feel like it. It means daily sacrifices for others and moment-by-moment gratitude to God. It means doing good even when it isn't “efficient” or “productive.”

**What is your hope for the readers of *You Are Not Your Own*?**

**Alan:** Quite honestly, this book comes from the tensions in my own heart and from watching students and friends suffer under the responsibilities of belonging to themselves, of perpetual cycles of inadequacy followed by coping mechanisms that leave us feeling more inadequate. I hope it will comfort anyone who feels utterly exhausted and bored of life. I hope it convicts anyone who feels more responsible to self-fulfillment than for their neighbors. I hope it dismantles the idols that promise us happiness and give us only meaningless toil.



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For more information about Alan visit [OAlanNoble.com](http://OAlanNoble.com)  
Follow him on Twitter: @TheAlanNoble.

## **Alan Noble, Author of *You Are Not Your Own***

Dr. O. Alan Noble is associate professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University, editor in chief of Christ and Pop Culture, and author of numerous articles.

In his youth Alan lived in Lancaster, California, where he was homeschooled by his mother. At age sixteen he finished high school and began attending Antelope Valley College, pursuing a certificate in music, which he earned but never filled out the paperwork for, so it probably doesn't count. He did, however, meet his wife, Brittany, at AVC, which definitely counts. Alan continued his undergraduate work at the Cal State Bakersfield satellite campus at AVC, earning his degree in English. Then he earned his master's in English at CSUB-AV.

Other things Alan did while in Southern California: tutored high school felons at a probation camp; substituted at various high schools; helped produce, write, rap, engineer, and record two hip-hop albums; taught composition and literature at Antelope Valley College; went bald; got married.

In 2007 Richard Clark contacted Alan about joining a new venture he was starting called Christ and Pop Culture. That November, Alan began writing and then editing for the site. Brittany and Alan moved to Waco, Texas, to pursue graduate degrees at Baylor University in 2008. While at Baylor, Alan studied under Ralph Wood, David Lyle Jeffrey, Luke Ferretter, and Richard Russell. His dissertation was written under the supervision of Dr. Ferretter and was titled "Manifestations of Transcendence in Twentieth-Century American Fiction: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, and Cormac McCarthy." Charles Taylor's work on secularism and the self formed the theoretical basis for the dissertation and much of Alan's later writing. While in Waco, Brittany and Alan had two children, Eleanor and Quentin, and they attended Redeemer Presbyterian Church. At nights, Alan continued to write and edit for Christ and Pop Culture, now with the title managing editor.

In the fall of 2014 the Nobles moved to Shawnee, Oklahoma, where Alan accepted a position as assistant professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University. After Richard Clark left Christ and Pop Culture for *Christianity Today*, Alan became editor in chief of the site. At this time, Alan began writing for *The Atlantic*, *Christianity Today*, and *First Things*, particularly on issues related to pluralism and secularism. The Nobles' third child, Frances, was born in 2015. As the 2016 election ramped up, Alan launched the group Public Faith with Michael Wear to offer an alternative evangelical political voice. He also joined the AND Campaign as an adviser.

Alan has written articles for Christian publications such as *Modern Reformation*, *In Touch* magazine, and *Christianity Today* and for secular publications like *Vox*, *Buzzfeed*, and *The Atlantic*. He has been interviewed, quoted, or cited in a number of major publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, MTV News, MSNBC, *The Guardian*, *Buzzfeed*, *Politico*, the *Village Voice*, Yahoo! News, ThinkProgress, The Blaze, *World* magazine, and *Slate*. And he has spoken at colleges, churches, and youth groups on a range of topics related to the church and culture.



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