

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING IDENTITY

by Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.

“I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

But Moses said to God, "*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11)

“We have seen the enemy and he is us.” (Pogo)

“I am just a different person when they are around.”

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, "*Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house*, that you have brought *me* thus far?" (2 Samuel 7:18)

“I look in the mirror and I don’t know the person staring back at me.”

“I think therefore I am.” (Rene Descartes)

“O Lord, *what is man* that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him?” (Psalm 144:3)

What do all these statements have in common? Among other possibilities, they are questions of identity. They raise the question of what gives me uniqueness, the right to act, or constancy in changing circumstances. Identification is an important part of life. If it were not, there would be no need for label makers, diagnostic systems, or personalized license plates.

Who am I? This three-word question has challenged history’s greatest philosophers. The challenge of this article, however, is not to answer the question that 2000 years worth of brilliant minds could not, but rather to determine what Christ has done in the life of a believer to provide a satisfying and sustaining sense of identity. When God makes a believer a new creation, how should that event—salvation—and its on-going ramifications—sanctification—change the believer’s self-perception and social interactions?

Defining “Biblical Identity”

Biblical Identity refers to the defining ideas, labels, and relational roles which make our actions or emotions seem right and rational. Identity, when healthy, remains constant even when circumstances and peer groups change. Identity should remain stable when no one is looking, when everyone is looking, when you are with the love of your life, or with an ardent enemy.

We act out of who we think we are. Identity is one of the primary ways that the heart expresses what it loves most. Identity is one of the defining marks of human motivation. By identifying ourselves as a loser, a salesman, a good/bad parent, the guy who knows how to get things, or whoever-you-want-me-to-be we implicitly make many choices. Those identity statements exclude some options and make others seem “obvious.” Changes in identity have a strong gravitational pull upon behavior and the emotions.

A good way to begin to identify your sense of identity is to consider how you introduce yourself to strangers. What are the first things you tell them about yourself? What do you want to know about them? These questions reveal your instincts about how you define and relate to people. We can learn a great deal about ourselves by the questions we ask, or do not ask. Another question that can reveal one's source of identity is, "How do you define success?"

- Health of key relationships
- Occupational accomplishment
- Educational advancement
- Sports allegiances
- Hobby involvement/skill
- Political stances
- Socio-economic status
- Appearance, attractiveness, attire, etc...

You may be wondering, does identity have this much influence? Think back to the last time you heard someone speak out against a popular position. The response was likely, "Who does this person think they are?" This question was often raised against Jesus, "And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" (Luke 5:21, cf. Matthew 21:10, John 12:34). It is common to trace from actions back to identity; it is just that we often do not do so in the midst of such a technical discussion.

It is important to note that this definition of identity overlaps with the concepts of security and purpose also found in this series on Christ-honoring alternatives to self-esteem.

Security: A prerequisite for security is a clearly defined identity. If your understanding of who you are fluctuates, then the likelihood of a stable sense of well-being will be compromised.

Purpose: A sense of identity goes a long way in defining one's purpose. The sense of "ought" (purpose) that we take into many situations emerges from those labels and roles by which we define ourselves.

Sources of Biblical Identity

When we read through the Bible we find many different labels and relational roles that are bestowed upon a believer. These roles are meant to increasingly define a Christian after his/her conversion. Unfortunately, as we read the Bible these statements do not come with parenthetical readings (identity clause). The biblical author (i.e., Paul, Peter, etc...) just refers to his reader in a way that he would not have if the reader were not a Christian. The biblical author's expectation is that becoming a Christian has changed who his reader is, and as a result, the reader should think, live, feel, and interact differently.

In the pages that follow we are going to examine eight different identity statements that are used to refer to Christians within the Bible. These statements are not meant to be exhaustive; the Bible has many other titles for believers. These statements are meant to be representative. As you read, the hope is that you will not only gain a sense of how salvation changes who you are (II Cor 5:17), but that you will begin to notice

the other identity statements in Scripture and have a framework with which to appreciate their significance and application.

Child of God: Familial Component to Identity

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

*“That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”
(Romans 8:21)*

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” (1 John 3:1)

These passages speak of the fatherly posture God takes towards those He redeems. When I think of this title I can hear my father warning me, “Hambrick men don’t do things like that.” His warning was not based on consequences; trying to verbally create a frightening enough outcome to dissuade me from an unwise choice. His warning was based upon our family name—identity.

Reputation is often something we only appreciate when it is lost. When we are saved we become a new person (Ephesians 4:20-24), literally a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Strangely, this new person has a history, habits, patterns of thinking, values, and commitments. With that baggage, however, comes a new name. This is why adoption is such an accurate depiction of salvation (Romans 8:15, 23). In spite of our sins, God chooses us and begins the work of transforming us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ.

An apt illustration of this is the parable of the prodigal son. In Luke 15:22 there is an often overlooked detail, “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and *put a ring on his hand*, and shoes on his feet (*emphasis added*).’” This ring is the equivalent of putting the prodigal’s name on the family checking account. It allowed the prodigal to do business on behalf of the family. He was invited back as a full member of the family.

This is both a grace and an intimidating responsibility. Our identity is that of blood-bought child of God. We are members of the family, with the awesome task of contributing to our Father’s kingdom. “Christian people act in keeping with the family name,” God the Father would caution. If we remember who we are, this will have a powerful impact on the choices we make and how we interact with others. As the members of the “Bride of Christ” (another familial identity statement) we should take the third commandment with greater honor and severity, “You shall not *take the name of the Lord your God* in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Exodus 20:7).”

The problem with this piece of identity is that those who would benefit from it most usually try to apply it in reverse or vaguely. Either we think of our difficult/absent family and view God similarly, or we think of God the Father as “something better” than we knew and get lost in regret. These are easy errors to make. For a sample of using this category of family, read 1 Thessalonians 2. Observe how Paul uses the categories of brother, father, mother, and children to describe his relationships with the members of this church.

In Christ: Cultural Component to Identity

“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:11)

“He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Corinthians 1:30)

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Most of us know what it is like to be *in* trouble, *in* hot water, *in* over our head, or *in* a pickle. So why is it so difficult to conceptualize what it means to be *in Christ*? The phrase is used eighty seven times in the New Testament and that number does not include similar references with the generic pronoun “in Him.”

“In Christ” refers to our culture as believers. Culture involves language, customs, heritage, and other things that make an environment feel comfortable. It is the idea captured in Acts 17:28, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

There is great security in this piece of biblical identity. There is no more stable place to be than in Christ. Stability ought not to be confused with safety and ease. In Christ we can rest assured that His expectations will not change (security), and that by His sufficient grace we will be enabled to complete any task God calls us to (confidence).

Theologian Wayne Grudem (1994) draws the following implication for what it means to be in Christ, “To remember it destroys our pride, gives us a constant feeling of deep dependence on Christ, and gives us great confidence, not in self, but in Christ working in us (p. 845).”

“In Christ” also carries the connotation of national, ethnic, racial, or regional origin. Comfort is taken by people of the same origin. It is thought: these are my people. Believers share a common story, experience, commitment, values, and purpose. Upon meeting someone you want to know if they are “like you.” To be in Christ means that the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit in the life of other people is a key way of distinguishing people.

However, this piece of identity comes with significant risk. If we are going to capitalize on the blessing it possesses, we must take a step of vulnerability to make ourselves known to our new people. The benefit of culture is that (in theory) it gives us a safe place to share our lives. When God gives us a new people “in Christ” we experience that (in practice) as we live out the “one another” commands of the New Testament.

Slaves of Righteousness: Volitional Component to Identity

“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of

sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” (Romans 6:16-18)

We are all slaves. We will serve whatever our hearts desire most. If you have an adverse reaction to the word slave, then chances are you do not understand human nature. Obedience is never optional. It is only a matter of who or what you will obey. Those who pledge to live a life of complete autonomy and independence are merely slaves to their own desires.

The Greek term for slave used in this passage is *doulos*. It referred to a bondservant, an individual who once was a slave by coercion. They were owned. After six years they could earn their freedom. If, after those six years, the slave loved his master and wanted to continue to work for him, then he could choose to become a bondservant. There was a ceremony in which the slave pledged his devotion to his master and the master pledged to care and provide for the slave (Exodus 21:1-6).

This is the image behind “slaves of righteousness.” We were once slaves to the law; imprisoned by its lofty and meticulous requirements. At salvation we are drawn to fall in love with the Law Giver; we pledge our devotion to Him. We are still slaves, but we love our Master, and, therefore, our service is in freedom. By obeying God we are doing the very things our heart would long to do. We so love God that we joyfully take His will as our own.

Biblical identity removes the anxiety of moral decision making. I am a slave of righteousness. I have willfully forfeited my right to make immoral decisions (this is not to imply perfectionism). Even when I believe the immoral decision would make me happier, create greater peace, or provide some other benefit, that is not “who I am.” I have come to trust my Master’s definition of happiness more than my own.

The Temple of God: Worship Component to Identity

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

You are a being created for worship. As such you are perpetually worshipping. You are pursuing what you believe to be most valuable, worthy, precious, and great. We do what we do to get what we want most and to serve who/what we love most. Human motivation is worship.

In the Old Testament, the temple was the site of worship. It was the place where God’s people gathered knowing they would be in God’s presence and, therefore, be in a position to worship. The temple was considered holy ground, and there were many regulations protecting its sanctity.

In I Corinthians 6 Paul is revealing the unity of these two themes. God is present in believers and our perpetual worship is now done in the presence of the Holy Spirit’s residence within us. This is who we are.

Being the temple of God causes us to think differently about our choices. No longer is obedience to Scripture a matter of mere duty: I know I have to do _____, but I don't want to. Obedience is now a matter of allegiance: I am honored to do _____, because it pleases the One I love most.

This is a continuation of being a slave of righteousness. Our purpose for keeping God's law changed. Obedience then becomes a means of showing hospitality to the honored guest (the Holy Spirit) of our souls. In the same manner that a historic house is treated differently in a given community because of a famous former resident, we treat our lives differently because of the sacred guest who is constantly in residence within us.

The Body of Christ: Corporate Component of Identity

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27)

I am a we. This is bad grammar, but good theology. I am a part of a corporate body that more completely defines who I am than I can by myself. The body metaphor exemplifies this corporate idea. What is an ear without the rest of the body; without the brain to register what the ear hears, or the eyes to identify and locate the one speaking?

Many of the other ideals of Western civilization are rooted in the doctrine of individualism. Alexis De Tocqueville—author of one of the most influential appraisals of democracy in America—said, "Individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness. Selfishness is a vice as old as the world... individualism is of democratic origin (as quoted in Welch, 1997)." This is not an attack on democracy, but a call to differentiate church doctrine from the "wisdom" of our day.

Consider how many modern proverbs emphasize *I* over *we*.

- Be all you can be.
- Look out for number one.
- Only the strong survive.
- You have to love yourself before you can love anyone else.
- Only you can decide what is right for you.

Genesis 2:18 says, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'" The question to ask is: what is bad about isolation? Genesis 2 must be considered in answering what does it mean to be made in the image of God (identity statement pertaining to worship).

God's people are called to lay our individual desires aside for the glory of God (who exists in a plurality of Trinity) and good of their fellow man in order to more accurately reflect the character of their selfless Savior. This is who we are—reflectors of Christ, bearers of God's image. As believers, we are a people redeemed to collectively reflect the character and power of Christ in a manner that we cannot as individuals.

This agenda is quite different from self-esteem. It is not about us; our reputation, our value, or our glory. We are to be about Christ—His reputation, His value, and His glory—because we have become part of His body. Our identity is absorbed into His. Our individual gifts, passions, and experiences (maintaining individual uniqueness) are to glisten—like rays of light in a diamond—from His body (the church), particular aspects of Christ's character.

Biblical identity realizes that we, and everyone else, are inadequate as the center of our affections. As fallen, fickle people the aftertaste of seeking satisfaction in ourselves turns sour. The solution is savoring the eternal majesty and worth of our Lord, and taking great satisfaction in being a part of Him through service to His kingdom. Biblical identity has longevity in its satisfaction and stability because it is rooted in something much larger than our individual finite lives and desires.

Fools for Christ's Sake: Humility Component of Identity

"For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure." (1 Corinthians 4:9-12)

Don't we all want to be impressive? In some way—physical attractiveness, witty sense of humor, a brilliant mind, widespread influence, dominant strength, financial extravagance—we want to be exceptional. We want to be known by the attributes in ourselves that we find most impressive. Or we wish we could find an attribute in ourselves others would find impressive.

The term fool is the antithesis of everything just listed. Yet that is Paul's term, along with weak, disrepute, reviled, and persecuted (see also the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11). Our identity, as followers of Christ, cannot be rooted in performance and reputation. Focusing on reputation will lead us away from the way of Christ and to a focus on self. These points of focus will not call us to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, keep our sacrifices private, and pray or fast to only be heard and seen by God (Matthew 5:38-6:18).

Biblical identity cannot be held tightly and survive. To try to protect our identity from the foolishness of the Gospel is to erode its very foundation. In Luke 9:24 Jesus says, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." 1 Corinthians 1:27-31 makes this point clearer:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The Gospel begins with our admission that we are incompetent for life. We do not have what it takes. We desperately need the grace, mercy, and wisdom of God. This does not change after salvation. Believers remain God-dependant. Spiritual maturity is not gradually decreasing of our need for God. To the

contrary, spiritual maturity is the ever increasing understanding of how to access God's wisdom and resources in the details of our dependence.

This piece of our identity brings humility yet prevents humiliation. Humiliation requires pride. If I readily admit my need for help, I am not ashamed when it comes. When I try to deny my need for help, I am embarrassed to receive it. Shame is a function of misplaced identity.

Self-esteem would tell us to establish our identity by affirming our merit, ability, and worth. Biblical identity would call us to humbly recognize our depravity and not to blush as we confidently approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) or rely upon the body of Christ to supplement our weakness.

Ambassadors & A Letter from Christ: Relational Component of Identity

"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:20)

"And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:3)

Identity, particularly in the midst of relationships, involves an agenda. One example of this is "the rescuer." Rescuers involve themselves with people who need their help. Rescuers become uncomfortable in relationships where things are "normal," because they no longer have a role or function in the relationship.

The identity statements of ambassador and a letter from Christ serve the function of providing believers with an identity in the midst of relationships. Our goal is to communicate God's agenda. We have been assigned the office as a representative or messenger of the God of the universe with the people around us. We have a message written on our lives.

This does not require "nothing but spiritual talk" with every person you meet. An ambassador builds relationships with his constituency. To reduce our ambassador role to perpetually reciting the plan of salvation and Ten Commandments is to be reductionistic. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 provides an example of our call as ambassadors:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Paul got to know the people with whom he interacted. He knew their heritage, way of life, and values in order to more skillfully convey the message his Lord wanted them to hear.

This piece of biblical identity gives us a new set of questions for measuring success in our relationships. We now ask have I established myself as a trustworthy person, in place of does this person like me? We ask have I demonstrated God's personal love for this individual, in place of what can this person do for me? We ask can I articulate how the gospel would make a difference in their life (either in salvation or continued spiritual growth), rather than how does this person make me feel?

Salt of the Earth & Light of the World: Productive Component of Identity

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

(Matthew 5:13-16)

If ambassador is for the relational part of life, salt and light are for the productive part of life (i.e., work, education, politics, etc...). This should not be understood to imply that relationships and productivity are mutually exclusive.

Being salt and light requires that we are consistently evaluating what, how, and why we are doing things. We will never perfectly establish God's kingdom on earth, because God has ordained that this will occur upon Christ's return. We are to desire God's kingdom be increasingly real, tangible, apparent, understood, appreciated, and longed for. This is a key element of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10)."

Involving ourselves in this endeavor is a part of the believer's identity. We are to be purifiers of our culture, workplace, school, and social settings. This is not to be a coerced action that we do like the youth group who adopted a mile of highway, and then reluctantly go out once a year fervently praying that none of their friends pass by.

This is what we do because it is who we are. We love the ways of God. We are thrilled by their wisdom and effectiveness. Our lives seem most at ease when God's ways are implemented around us (this attitude reinforces what it means to be "in Christ"). Our hearts cry out with David's:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11)

When this is not the case, we have lost sight of who we are by falling into the fear of man, catering to some other sin as our means of joy, or failing to understand the wisdom of God's Word.

CONCLUSION

Please permit—or excuse—a bit of elementary humor. When is a door not a door? When it is ajar. When is a thief not a thief? It is not just when he is dormant from his thievery. The thief may only be sleeping, he may not have a pressing desire, opportunity may be wrong, or he may be invested in some other pursuit. Lack of activity does not change one's identity.

Ephesians 4:28 says, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” A thief is no longer a thief when he is willing to put the needs of others before his wants. His identity is no longer wrapped up in being blessed, but, rather, in being a blessing. That is the intent of this article: that you understand and embrace a biblical portrait of a Christ-honoring identity to such an extent that your choices change.

Who are you? I hope I have not further muddied the water. You should have more categories to think about this question than you did nine pages ago. What does being a Christian change about who you are? At this point, you should realize that it changes everything.

Your physical being remains the same. Your life experiences are not rewritten. Your skill set is not radically shuffled. Initially, your network of relationships is not altered. Yet at the same time, your purpose in relationships and the way that you establish them begins to change. Your skills and abilities take on a different meaning because they are seen as blessings from God through which you are to bless others. The events of your life are interpreted by a different grid. You realize you are not your own, you were bought with a price (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

REFERENCES

- Grudem, W. (1994) *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
Welch, E. (1997) *When People Are Big and God Is Small*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Identity

For each item place a check in the blank if you can provide evidence that you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

- _____ Being embarrassed does not seem like a threat to me.
- _____ I am willing to obey/participate even when I feel inadequate.
- _____ My actions do not change based on the people I am around.
- _____ Failure does not dominate my thought life.
- _____ Changing jobs or schools would not change my self-perception.
- _____ I can be cordial to people of other political parties or sports allegiances.
- _____ I have friends at various socio-economic levels.
- _____ I get nervous around people who are beautiful.
- _____ Rejection is not devastating to me.
- _____ I am the same person at work/school that I am at church.
- _____ I do not do things simply for the approval of others.
- _____ I do not have to be complemented in order to work hard.
- _____ My home life and public life are consistent with one another.
- _____ I have significant anxiety when meeting new people.
- _____ When I am not around people, I feel lost and discontent.
- _____ Biblical categories of identity seem relevant when I am distressed.
- _____ I naturally ask people about their religious beliefs as I get to know them.
- _____ I am at ease even when the people around me have more education or money.

Biblical Identity refers to the defining ideas, labels, and relational roles which make our actions or emotions seem right and rational. Identity, when healthy, remains constant even when circumstances and peer groups change. Identity does not change when no one is looking, when everyone is looking, when you are with the love of your life, or when you are with an ardent enemy.

*** The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring confidence.

Reflective Questions

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to walk you back through the key concepts of this article while causing you to focus upon your own effort to manifest biblical identity.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: List all of the “I am” statements you make about yourself. For example, “I am a husband, father, counselor, country boy, etc...” Start by listing the major areas of involvement in your life (i.e., home, work, church, recreation, upbringing, etc...).

