



Chapter 7

Identity in Christ

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Our personal identity is one of the most important things to understand about ourselves. Knowing who we are, what makes us tick, what makes us laugh, what gets on our nerves, what brings us true joy—those are essential things to name, because this understanding will affect everything else. Personal identity affects how we look at life, how we deal with conflicts and even who we choose as friends!

If I were to ask you, “Who are you?” Would you respond with your name, age, your nationality, your hobbies, where you grew up and what career path you are following? All these external things may be an important part of you, but they are not permanent – they can easily change or pass. They may be facts about who you are today, but ten years ago, and ten years from now, many of your responses would probably have changed.

FACTORS THAT MAY HAVE SHAPED OUR IDENTITY

Our identity, or the way that we view and understand who we are at our core, our essential self, is often shaped by various factors. However, even these things are not our deepest form of identity, nor are they permanent. Let’s see what factors may have contributed toward our identity or the view of ourselves:



- **Childhood experiences:** Was our childhood relatively happy, safe and fulfilling? Or was it the opposite? Could we venture out and achieve new heights? Did our parents believe in us? etc.
- **Our parents:** Yes, this is part of our childhood experience as mentioned above, but our parents contributed greatly toward our identity. It matters whether our parents (or one of them) were controlling, abusive, critical, negative, overbearing, manipulative or judgemental. Or, on the other hand, were they “safe”, encouraging, loving, kind, generous, willing to trust us and allowed us freedoms,

set healthy boundaries, were verbal and physical in their demonstration of their love for us. The status of our parents, or lack thereof, where and how they lived, their friends and peers, career paths and our family's reputation could affect how we see ourselves.

- **Our nationality and culture:** Being a Westerner is vastly different from being Asian, Latin American or African. Our nationality will have a profound influence on how we respond to issues, it shapes our values, how we view the world around us, what we will loathe, how inclusive or independent we are, etc. Our nationality, tribal roots or caste and our mother tongue often influence our view of ourselves.
- **Our age:** Some of us are mature adults at the age of 21, influenced by our gender, but others only at 25, and some never! Some, when they are aged 45, start to slow down and be less agile or alert, less energetic, and more so after the age of 70. Generation Xers will have a very different mindset from Boomers or Busters.
- **Our gender:** Our gender may contribute toward how our parents or society view us, our career path and our choices. We may be blocked or hindered due to being a female, needing to work much harder to be acknowledged than our male counterpart.
- **Our emotions:** We are sometimes controlled by how we feel and this then influences the way we view or value ourselves, unless we know that feelings are not a safe foundation for our identity or self-image.
- **Our personality:** Introverts often wish they were more outspoken with an ability to reach out to many others. However, extroverts on the other hand often wish they were not as boisterous, loud, impulsive in their responses and letting it all out. Our personality type often influences our career choice.
- **Our performance:** Our performance and achievements, or the lack thereof, changes from day to day and could influence our self-image. We often allow our shortcomings, weaknesses, faults, sin, habits, abilities, giftings, intelligence, education and goals to shape what we think about ourselves. If we do well or perform good deeds, we may feel on top of the mountain and self-assured, while if we do something bad or fail, we may feel down in the dumps and view ourselves as garbage. Do we appear to be successful? Are we admired? How do we think about ourselves in this regard?
- **Our religion:** If we belong to the majority religious group in our home country, we may feel good about ourselves. But religion, our good works or piety will certainly not bring us to God as they are merely like filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6). Only a vital relationship with Christ will set us apart for God and His glory.
- **What others say:** What others say and think about us could affect our view of ourselves. If they are slandering us, gossiping, laughing at us, judging us or threatening us, our identity may plummet to the very lowest level possible.
- **Our looks:** Are we wearing the best clothing with the best brands? What colour is our skin and how dark is it? Do we have a lovely skin or is it full of blemishes? Our looks could also be about our hair, teeth, height, weight, features, etc. – all these factors could affect our identity if we allow them. My physique and sports achievements (or the lack of them) can also contribute to what I think of myself.
- **Our circumstances:** Our identity is often affected by what we do for a living, our career choice, the company where we work, our colleagues and the circles in which we move, our education, our status, where we live, our property and possessions, our bank balance, our general health, our prominence, whom we married, etc.
- **Our view of ourselves:** What do I feel and think about what I perceive in the mirror or in a photo of myself? Even if we are not correct in our thinking about ourselves, our identity is often based on exactly this. It then does not matter what

positive things others may say or how our circumstances change for the better. We may have a cannot-do-mentality and could get stuck at having a very negative view of ourselves. When we then do not achieve, it could further influence how we view ourselves.

- **Our friends:** During our childhood, children and teenagers, even friends, can be extremely cruel by teasing us about our looks, performance or weaknesses. Some, if they have hundreds of social media friends and many "likes", feel fantastic and on top of the mountain. Others who lose such friends, even if it is not their fault, could feel that life is not worth living, even contemplating suicide.

It is vital to know that none of the above can serve as a solid foundation for one's identity. Why not? Because, even if positive, each of these factors mentioned above will either suddenly or gradually change and then most people would lose their confidence. Building our identity on these factors can be compared to building our house on the sand – it will fall! We need a much more rock-solid foundation on which to build our identity or self-image.

THE LIES THAT WE BELIEVE

We often believe lots of lies about ourselves that cripple or paralyse us. We often feel insecure; most of our problems are traceable to these lies:



- What I think about myself is one of the most important things about me.
- What I think God thinks about me. What my pastor thinks about me. I am inadequate. I simply cannot measure up to what God expects from me.
- I fear what others will think or say of me - parents, family, peers, authority figures.
- When I make a mistake or sin, what comes to mind first and foremost?
- If others know all about me, they will hate or despise me.
- I am worthless. Thus, I will add to my value by what (and how much) I do.
- God loves others much more than He loves me. He doesn't notice me. I think He loves and cares about others more than me.
- I am no-one, insignificant, a failure, ugly, stupid, awkward, broken, inferior, a child, not as good as ... (comparing myself negatively with someone), hopeless, without personality, no opinion of my own, I simply cannot..., talentless, restless, an addict, a sinner, a divorcee, a widow, jobless, poor, rich, not popular, defeated, a loser, a stutterer, trying hard but it's never enough, always falling short, etc. Please see 2 Corinthians 10:12 where Paul advises us not to compare ourselves with others.

Remember: We can never find our true identity within ourselves, comparing ourselves negatively with others (Galatians 6:4), comparing ourselves with our goals or with what we want to become or achieve. King David loved God with his whole heart, but he made mistakes and sinned too, and yet ... God called him, "*a man after my own heart.*" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). But then what is the correct basis and foundation of our self-image and identity?

WHAT IS THE IMAGE OF GOD?

God said right in the beginning, "*Let us make man in our own image.*" (Genesis 1:26; 2:7) Nowadays we often hear evolutionary ideas in public and in our educational institutions - that we come from monkeys that evolved. The question that no-one can answer in this regard, is, "If we evolved from monkeys or chimpanzees, what is the reason that evolution stopped? Because I see no half-humans walking around in our streets."



The image of God is definitely not about our body - our body is not essential to our image bearing, because it is merely the "tent" in which I live. We will one day have resurrected bodies (1 Corinthians 15; Revelation 6:9-11), but we will still be made in or carry the image of God. The image of God is also not about our function, deeds, performance and achievements. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul says that we consist of three parts: body, soul and spirit. Please see the drawing demonstrating this in the chapter on Sanctification. The image of God is about our intrinsic value, God's righteous attributes displayed in us, thus about the perfect state of our spirits if we are in Christ, our ability to relate to and worship God, and regarding the soul that can think, feel, imagine, remember, reason, respond and will. These are not things that animals can do.

We "look like Him" in how we are put together - we bear God's image. It is our soul and spirit that sets us apart from animals and plants. Only human beings have a conscience, the free will to make intelligent choices, our intelligence and emotions, our memory, and a spirit that can commune with God. No other created being has these capabilities. Only human beings can be washed in the Blood of Jesus, regenerated, reborn, needing and having our sins forgiven, being justified and declared righteous, becoming sons and daughters of God. Angels do not even have this privilege even though they may desire it.

OUR INTRINSIC VALUE

The image of God that we bear, gives us intrinsic (fundamental, basic) value. Coins and bills have intrinsic value. I can step on that coin or bill, spit on it, drag it through the mud, speak badly about it by saying it is inferior, but it does not change its value. Human beings have such intrinsic value, and especially when we are washed in the blood of Christ. If you are to be asked what your value is, is it US\$50 million? Or US\$100 million? Or do you perhaps feel that your value is only US\$150? No, your value is much more than all of these amounts.



Your value is equal to the value of the Blood of Christ that was shed for you. Through shedding His Blood, Christ paid your ransom, redeemed you from the Kingdom of Darkness. You were a slave of the father of lies, Satan, but Jesus paid for your freedom so that you can belong to the Kingdom of Light, the Kingdom of God. If you have handed the reins of your life to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then you belong to the Lord God Almighty. You are worth what someone was willing to pay for your ransom: the Blood of Christ! Even if you were the only human being on earth, Christ would still have died for you. Your value and worth are not merely a collective one, but your value and worth as an individual is equal to the Blood of Christ!

*Our only healthy foundation
of a good self-image is to
know that we are beloved.*

Your intrinsic value is not based on your performance, or you could be filled with pride if you succeed or with shame should you fail. Your value is not based on your family, upbringing, education, what others say and think, your possessions and clothing, your emotions, career choice, your hobbies or on your looks. These things can so easily change within a minute, lost for ever, but your intrinsic value cannot change, because it is based on something that is not going to change in value. For this reason, our self-image or identity can thus be secure, not because of ourselves, but due to the Blood of Christ and what the Lord has done for us on the Cross of Calvary.

As we grow in Him and we allow the Lord's refining process of sanctification, the image of Christ in us becomes more and more evident to others. John the Baptist said, "*He must become greater; I must become less.*" (John 3:30) Others will not have to guess who we belong to - it will be clear to all.

OUR IDENTITY APART FROM CHRIST



Ephesians 4:22-24 talks about six layers of corruption if we live apart from Christ. Without the saving grace of God, the saving work of Christ, we are utterly unacceptable to God and without hope, says Ephesians 4:17-21:¹




- **Hardness:** According to verse 18, our root problem is the hardness of our hearts against God.
- **Darkness:** This hardness darkens our understanding (verse 18).
- **Ignorance:** The fruit of this darkness is a gross ignorance of reality (verse 18), even if I am highly intelligent or educated.
- **Values:** I will be ignorant of the true value of things in relation to God and eternity, naturally yielding to covetousness and licentiousness (verse 19), going after wrong things and following the wrong paths.
- **Futility:** This leads to a life of futility (verse 17) with years wasted on futile things.
- **Alienated:** Our last layer of corruption that seals our hopelessness is (in verse 18) that we become alienated from God and the life that we are to live in Him. Paragraphs 1 to 5 is part of someone who is dead (Luke 9:60; 1 Timothy 5:6; Ephesians 2:1; 3:12).

We need Christ to enter our hearts, melting our hard hearts with His love and mercy, shining His light to dispel our darkness, bringing our spirits to life in God and making us new creatures in Him – only this will rekindle our hope.

Ephesians 4:22-24 ²

 Verse 22	Verse 24 
Old person	New person
Corresponding to former life	Corresponding to God
Corrupted through desires	Created in righteousness and holiness
Based on deceit	Based on truth

MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING OUR IDENTITY ³

- **Rules and regulations:** We may believe that Christianity is merely a new set of rules or guidelines for behaviour. It is not a missional-to-do-list, a new form of being under the law, thus not truly free. 
- **Performance:** We may believe that our identity is based on what we do instead of what God has done – a works-based righteousness and not a faith-based righteousness.
- **My works:** Being human *doings* instead of human *beings* – putting our hope in our own works and efforts. As said above, if we succeed it could lead to pride, and if not, to shame.
- **A façade:** Christianity has become a religious façade, based on performance, to hide behind.

¹ Piper, John. *Put on the New Person* [Online]. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/put-on-the-new-person>

² Ibid.

³ Vanderstelt, Jeff. 3 September 2015. *God's Big Work in Little Us* [Online]. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/gods-big-work-and-your-little-mission>



TRUTHS REGARDING OUR TRUE IDENTITY⁴

The truth is that our identity can only have a healthy foundation if it is based in our faith in who God is and on what He has done through Jesus' death on the Cross of Calvary – only this leads to who we really are. The following truths apply:



- **We are a new creation:** If we are in Christ, we are a new creation. From us flow good works that the Lord has prepared beforehand in which we are to walk (Ephesians 2:10).
- **In Christ:** We act like Him because we are *in Christ* (Romans 6:11; 8:1).
- **Faith in what He has done:** Whatever we do is done because we put our faith in what *He has done*.
- **He first loved us:** *"We love because He first loved us."* (1 John 4:19)
- **He first served us:** We serve because Jesus served us first.
- **His mission pleased the Father:** We are not on a mission in order to earn the Father's goodwill, but we know Jesus was on a mission first in order to please the Father on our behalf.
- **A significant someone:** There is no need for us to do anything in order to become someone. We act out of gratitude for what the Lord has done for us and because we are in Christ.
- **New actions:** Being in Christ results in our new 'doing' for Christ, but not out of compulsion or to earn anything (Ephesians 5:8-10).

Jon Bloom⁵ says something that may at first seem controversial:

"Our god may or may not be the god of our creed. We may say our god is the Lord, but that may not really be true (Luke 6:46; Isaiah 29:13). Our god is the person or thing we believe has the greatest power to determine who we are, why we're here, what we should do, and what we're worth. Our god is what we can't help but seek and follow, because we believe our god's promises will bring us the greatest happiness."

HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTIFICATION

The righteousness that Christ earned for us on the Cross of Calvary is fully explained in the chapter on Sanctification. Jesus satisfied the Father's requirement of blood for our ransom and for living a righteous life – this brought about peace and reconciliation with the Father on our behalf. Christ pleased the Father on our behalf. If we believe in Christ as Lord and Saviour, repenting from the sin of living in a separated manner from the Father, He washes us in His precious Blood, the Father forgives us, and we are then clothed with the righteousness that is achieved by Christ.



The Father now declares us fully righteous. Our status before the Father is one of being fully justified. The word "justified" can be explained by using the words "just as if I'd never sinned". We stand blameless before the Father, clothed with the righteousness of Christ who lived a sinless life which He lay down for my ransom. Now we belong to the Kingdom of God. We are a new person with a new identity which is found in Christ. Because Christ never changes, our identity is secure in Him. Even if we are not feeling on top of the world, our identity is in Him. When others speak badly about us, or we have failed, or when we cannot perform or achieve for some reason or another, our identity in Christ is unshaken. *Being in Christ* is the correct foundation and basis of our true identity.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bloom, Jon. 24 January 2017. *Lay Aside the Weight of Insecurity* [Online]. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lay-aside-the-weight-of-insecurity>

Some Christians want to use this secure status to justify whatever sin they want to commit and whatever lifestyle they choose to follow. We need to keep in mind that Christ's Blood is never cheap – it was shed as a precious and painful sacrifice for our salvation. Some want to use their status in Christ to demand that they should be rich, famous, healthy and prosperous in all things, and if not, then they are no longer interested in following Christ.

When we speak about our identity being in Christ, we are not promoting idolising of self where all else in life revolves around *our* benefit and comfort, no! Christ is the centre of our lives – not I. Some call themselves princes and princesses ... this is fine, but they expect others to treat them in this manner. However, Christ is the centre of my worship – not I. Paul forewarns us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, with sober judgement (Romans 12:3; 2 Corinthians 12:6). What we have in Christ is an incredible gift of sheer grace. It is obtained by our faith in Christ - not entitlement based on pride!

Although we have many privileges when we are in Christ, we need to keep in mind that, although we have a special status in Him, we deserve nothing. Our new identity is an undeserved gift of grace. Yes, we are sons and daughters of the Almighty God and co-heirs of the King of kings, but we need to be ready to pick up our crosses and follow the Lord, ready to die for Him, regardless of whether we benefit or not.

In ourselves, we remain to be undeserving servants of the Most High! Jesus said, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:10) We need to follow the Lord in righteousness and holiness, more and more resembling the Lord whom we serve in our assignment of becoming holy. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10)

RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND

We talked in the chapter on Sanctification about how we can renew our minds, but we will shortly repeat some of it here too. Soaking our minds in the Word of God is paramount if we want to strengthen our new inner man. We need to fill our minds with the thoughts that are from above. The Word of God can wash and shape our minds to become conformed to the mind of Christ (Colossians 3:2-3).

As we fill our minds with the Word of God, we will become solidified in, and convinced of, our identity in Christ and of His love for us. This will push away the residues of our broken past, the deceit of the world and its negative messages of spiritual inferiority and condemnation toward us. Without this blessed identity, we fear Satan. As we remain in Christ, we are secure in our identity which we carry in true humility and deep gratitude while running our race with confidence.



PRIVILEGES IN CHRIST


As we remain in Christ, we have certain privileges, and again, it is by grace alone:⁶

- Yes, we have sinned, but we are forgiven. I am now declared righteous in the Father's sight, fully justified (Colossians 1:14).

⁶ Ibid. (Bloom) [Online].

- Yes, I may at times feel like a failure, but in Christ every failure will work for an ultimate good (Romans 8:28).
- At times I may feel inferior or insignificant, but I am seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6): Christ was elevated to sit on the right hand of the Father and His Name is elevated above every other name. We have a position of honour with Christ, with Satan dethroned and under our feet. In Christ, we can rule and reign in this life.
- Yes, I may not be rich in earthly goods, but I am a co-heir with Christ (Romans 8:17).
- At times I may feel lonely and without purpose, but I am a part of the Body of Christ with a unique function (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12:18).
- Yes, I may at times feel like an orphan, a stranger or an alien, but now I am adopted by God as His child. Now I am part of the Family of God, a member of His household (Ephesians 1:5; 2:19; Romans 8:17). I belong!
- I am part of a chosen race, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 1:9).
- Christ is now my new identity. I have become a new person and in the coming age, I will receive a new name (Revelation 2:17).

REFLECTION, JOURNALLING AND DISCUSSION

- In which areas of my life am I perhaps still basing my identity on a wrong, weak foundation? 
- Explain in 4 to 6 sentences what the terms "righteousness in Christ" and "justification" mean.
- How can David be called "a man after God's own heart" if he had failed so drastically by murdering someone and committing adultery?
- What are our privileges in Christ?

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