

Our Identity in Christ

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

How did your identity change when you became a Christian?

What causes you to doubt that you have changed by becoming a Christian?

IDENTITY AND SALVATION

(1) What we were created to be

The Bible is clear that men and women were created in the image of God (Genesis 1v26). Theologians have disagreed how human beings exhibit the image of God. Some have thought that the image of God refers primarily to our ability to reason, communicate in language, or to our spiritual capacity. In the light of New Testament passages it seems most likely that to be created in the image of God means to bear the *character of God* (see: Ephesians 4v24; Colossians 3v10). We were created in original righteousness.

Whereas we use the term 'image' to mean the identity that we project to others, which is not necessarily our 'real self', when man was created in God's image there was no distinction between his identity and his image. He really was righteous. This can be seen from the parallel example of Jesus, who is the 'image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1v15; cf also John 14v19).

(2) What we became through the fall

When man rebelled against God he sinned and lost his original righteousness. He no longer bore the image of God perfectly. As such his identity was changed. God himself explains what man has become in consequence of his sin.

Read: Genesis 6v5 & 8v21; Jeremiah 17v9; Romans 3v10-18;

How have human beings been changed as a consequence of their rebellion against God?

How does the doctrine of the Fall help us to understand the paradox that we feel both worthless and infinitely valuable at the same time?

In consequence of the Fall, men and women try to put on a righteous image for themselves, covering up the reality of their sinfulness by their good deeds and religious ceremonies. The Old testament makes clear that men and women cannot cover themselves up in this way, but need new hearts.

(3) What we become when we are saved

The central message of the Bible is that God has acted to rescue men and women from sin and its consequences. He has done this through the death of Jesus upon the cross. Those who repent and put their faith in Jesus are justified and regenerated (born again). These twin truths are the foundations of our renewed identity in Christ.

(a) Justification

Read: Galatians 2v15-16 & 3v6

What does it mean to be justified?

How was Abraham's identity changed in the eyes of God when he believed?

How does God see us if we are Christians?

(b) Regeneration (new birth)

Read: 2 Corinthians 5v17; Titus 3v3-6

What happens to people when they become Christians?

Why is it important to understand that Christians are not only forgiven and justified, but also regenerated (reborn) and renewed?

Regeneration is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise that God would give men and women new hearts (See: Jeremiah 31v33; Ezekiel 36v26-27)

(4) What we will be in glory

Our present justification and regeneration guarantee that we will share in the glory when God's Kingdom comes.

Read: 1 Corinthians 15v49; 1 John 3v2

What will we be like when Jesus returns and we are resurrected from the dead?

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY

The Christian experience is one of tension. Whilst we are justified and regenerated we remain fallen and subject to sin and temptation. We are not yet what we will be. Our present experience is one of being progressively renewed into the likeness of Jesus (2 Corinthians 3v18; Colossians 3v10). We must actively participate in this process by 'putting on' a new self which is like Christ (Ephesians 4v24).

As a result of this tension Christians experience an identity crisis. Are they really:

- 1 their fallen self who sins and desires to sin
- 2 their justified self who is declared to be perfectly righteous
- 3 their new self who is growing in Christ-likeness

In effect they are all three at the same time! They are conscious of the presence of the sinful desires which are the marks of fallen humanity (Galatians 5v16-17) but should also experience progress in transformation so that they exhibit the fruits of the Spirit and a changed way of life (Galatians 5v22-24; Ephesians 2v1-10; Titus 1v1).

However the New Testament teaches that our true identity is found in our justification. We are declared to be righteous on the basis of what Christ has done, and we know that we will be made righteous when we are resurrected into glory. Our 'real self' is the person that we will be in the new creation. For this reason when we 'put on Christ' (Ephesians 4v22-24; Colossians 3v5-10) we are not adopting an 'image' which is untrue and hypocritical. We are becoming what we really are. However if we seek to claim a self-righteousness which comes from our own actions, and not because of what Christ has done, we are adopting an image which is untrue (eg Luke 18v9-14).

THE SOURCE OF IDENTITY FOR CHRISTIANS

Last week we saw that we can draw our sense of identity from:

- 1 from what we think (rational)
- 2 from what we feel (emotional)
- 3 from what we do (existential)
- 4 from how others treat us (experiential)

None of these should be the primary source of identity for a person who is a Christian. Christians should obtain their sense of identity not from themselves, or from others, but from God and his word: i.e. from what he says about them (his verdict) and from what he promises. To be a Christian is to live by faith, and this means trusting that we are already declared to be righteous, and that in glory we will be made righteous. For Christians our identity is established by faith.

Whilst Christians are called to live by faith, they are also subject to the attacks of Satan (which means 'the accuser') who wants them to doubt their real identity as justified sinners.

Read: Zechariah 3v1-5; Revelation 12v10; 1 John 1v18-2v2

How does Satan seek to cause Christians to doubt their new identity in Christ?

Why is it so easy to believe his accusations?

What answer do Christians have to his accusations?

PAUL'S SENSE OF HIMSELF

As a result of his conversion Paul viewed himself differently, even changing his name. He expected that all Christians would experience the same change of identity.

Read: Galatians 2v20; Romans 8v18-20; Colossians 3v3-4; Ephesians 4v22-24

How did Paul think that his identity had changed by becoming a Christian?

Who did Paul think that he really was?