

BACK TO THE BASICS: IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

Excerpt from the Forward to *Who Am I?* by Jerry Bridges:

Who are you?

- *The man sitting to my left at a dinner referred to himself as a carpenter. Carpentry is his vocation, but it is not who he is.*
- *A lady with a broken marriage said to a friend, "I am just a failure." Although she had failed in her marriage, that is not who she is.*
- *I grew up in moderate poverty. To this day, my default answer to the question, "Who am I?", is, "I am the little boy growing up on the dirt street alongside the railroad track." But that is not who I am.*

So, occupation, interests, education, etc.—small talk aside—who are you, really? “In an effort to find an answer, we often move from one relationship to another, and one possession to another, one job to another, one religious commitment to another, to one addiction to another.” We have an identity crisis.

All of us wrestle with our identity:

- *Les Misérables* — “Who Am I?”
- *Lou Holtz* — “One thing is for certain: There will be one thing that will dominate your life. I strongly suggest it be something you can be proud of.”
- Stories
 - Athletes who life unravel after retirement
 - Couples who are married for 25-30 years and then divorce when the kids are gone
 - Professing believer who is up and down in his personal faithfulness and religious alignment

THE ESSENCE OF A BIBLICAL IDENTITY

We could go back to the very beginning and consider the fact that our identity is foundationally based upon the fact that we are creatures—therefore, we are under authority, we are accountable, we should be humble, etc.

However, for the Christian, our identity is wrapped up in Christ, and that will be our focus here and should be our focus in discipleship. In the introduction to his book, *Who Am I?*, Jerry Bridges writes, “[There is a] common tendency to answer the question, “Who am I?”, in terms of some subjective experience. Many of us answer in terms of our vocation. Others focus on a particularly formative or emotional experience.... As Christians, however, our identity is to be found in our relationship with Christ, not in our subjective and often negative life experiences.”¹

Key Concept: “in Christ” (theological concept: union with Christ) — *Illustration:* a cup of water dumped into the ocean OR penny in a cup

Key Statements: “Jesus is...; therefore, I am...”

1. *Who am I? Jesus is my liberty; I am saved by Christ.*

- Terms — delivered, rescued, ransomed, pardoned, reconciled, adopted (NOT “got saved” but “was saved”)
 - Unconditional election
 - Eternal security
- Passages
 - **Creation** — John 1:1, 3; Colossians 1:16-17; Revelation 4:11
 - **Recreation** — Ephesians 1:3-14, 19-2:10; 4:24; Colossians 1:21-22; 3:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17
- Statements
 - “I’m not who I used to be.”
 - “I’m a child of the one true King.”

- Paul's statements — "I am the least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9); "I am the very least of all the saints" (Ephesians 3:8); "sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15)
- **Illustration:** John Bunyan's statement — "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

2. *Who am I? Jesus is my life; I am satisfied in Christ.*

- **Key passage: Colossians 3:1-4; 2:8-10ff**
 - **Colossians** — supremacy & (therefore) sufficiency of Christ
 - **Colossians 2:8-10** — (1) Beware human answers and activities (vv. 8, 16-23); (2) Jesus is more than enough (vv. 9-10, "fullness/complete")
 - **Colossians 3:1-4** — "Christ...is our life"; *All I have is Christ* = don't need anything else for spiritual fullness or satisfaction
- **Everything else is insufficient.** — Galkin: "other things rob us of our ability to enjoy Christ"
 - **Ecclesiastes 1-5** — summarize his search for satisfaction in ALL things "under the sun"; his conclusion was that the search for satisfaction outside of the fear of God is "vanity" and "striving after wind"
 - **Jeremiah 2:13** — we forsake God, the Fountain of Living Water, and go after moldy, broken cisterns that can hold no water
 - **Hosea 2:14ff**
- **God is more than enough.** — Romans 5:20-21; 8:31-39 (esp. v. 32)
 - Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* — "your good days are never so good that you're beyond the need of God's grace; your bad days are never so bad that you're beyond the reach of God's grace"
 - Tullian Tchividjian — *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*
 - **Illustration:** *I Run to Christ* (when...), *Complete in Thee* (each want supplied...), *Chosen As His Children*

3. *Who am I? Jesus is my Lord; I am a slave of Christ.*

- **Before there were ever any "Christians," there were "disciples."**
 - Throughout the New Testament, the term "disciple" refers generally to a learner or pupil who was closely associated with a particular teacher (i.e., a follower [English "fan" on steroids]). In other words, those who were officially or (merely) popularly recognized as rabbis (i.e., religious teachers) all had disciples who would follow their teaching, their example, and even their daily schedules (cf. Mark 2:18). They were quite literally "followers" of that particular teacher (cf. Matthew 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21).
 - And so it was that those who first believed in Jesus and began to follow Him as their Lord and Savior were called His disciples (cf. Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). After His ascension, all those who followed in the footsteps of those first twelve disciples were also called disciples (Acts 6:1-2, 7; 11:26; 14:20, 22; 15:10). Again, this was just a common title given to learners who followed the words and ways of a particular rabbi or master.
 - It wasn't until Acts 11:26 in the city of Antioch that Jesus' disciples were first called "Christians" to identify them as the very disciples of Jesus Christ (i.e., in contrast with all other religious disciples). It was a more specific title that was chosen for them and identified them clearly and publicly as followers of Jesus. It was also a title that caused them to experience derision, oppression, and persecution, for they were now bearing the very name and offense of Christ (cf. 1 Peter 4:16).
 - Two thousand years later, we live in a drastically different world than those early believers. Whereas the title "Christian" was disparagingly given to them, bringing with it opposition, the term today is commonplace and identifies all those who merely practice the religion called "Christianity" (even if they are a far cry from actually following the words and ways of Jesus Christ). It no longer bears the novelty, distinction, and difficulty that it first did. And, ironically, it is the term "disciple" that seems to have fallen away from common usage.

- It seems then, perhaps, that the tables have turned for these two terms. Today, to call oneself a Christian is to earn acceptance (e.g., just consider President Obama’s earnestness to convince us that he is one), but to identify oneself in conversation as a “disciple” or “follower” of Jesus Christ is to be estranged and perhaps mistreated. Regardless of which title you use or have heaped upon you, the point is that believers are followers of Jesus Christ—He is their entire identity. They are His “disciples.”
- **Illustration:** “I am N” t-shirts being sold by VOM to identify with Arab Christians whose homes are being marked with the Arabic “N” to label them as followers of the Nazarene
- **Titus 1:1 (etc.)** — “slave of God and sent-one of Jesus Christ”²
- **Ephesians 4:17-6:9/Colossians 3:1-4:6** — In both books, this section exhorts us to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ (“Lord” 12x/“Christ” 13x/“Jesus” 2x/“Savior” 1x in Eph. passage; “Lord” 9x/“Christ” 9x/“Jesus” 1x in the Col. passage).

THE IMPORTANCE OF A BIBLICAL IDENTITY

Our identity affects our worldview and mission.

- Our identity determines whether we're walking by faith or by sight, which in turn determines how we view/interpret our world and our purpose in it.
- If our identity is wrapped up in “stuff,” then our mission will be quite temporal/earthy. But, if our identity is wrapped up in “eternity in our hearts,” then we will view life as deeper than the “seen” and we will see our purpose as greater than ourselves.
- If we believe that Christ is our liberty, life, and Lord // that He granted us salvation, that He alone provides satisfaction, and that we are therefore His slaves // that He created and recreated us, that we are complete only in Him, and that our commitment to Him is required and reasonable — then we will humbly and joyfully accept & willingly and earnestly engage in our mission of disciple-making. We will understand His mission as our own — this will become our worldview.

- **Illustration (-):** the man who’s identity on Facebook was being a Ron Paul proponent → he made his opinions known well, but blew his mission of teaching a biblical worldview to his family (as evidenced in his sons)
- **Illustration (-):** after the Boston marathon bombings (which coincided with congressional conversations about gun control), people used that incident to spout their opinions on Facebook, without considering the real spiritual tragedy of that situation—their worldview and mission was out-of-focus, because their identity was in their “political freedoms”
- **Illustration (+):** Brian & Sherry Trainer — God has never given them children or “permission” to go into full-time missions; but, they know who they are in Christ and what that requires of them, so they engage in 5-8 missions trips a year and they sold their home so they could be ready if the “call” ever came.

Our identity affects our joy and confidence.

- Our identity determines whether or not we are confident and satisfied when circumstances change, when personal failure occurs, when personal dreams are dashed, etc.
- **Illustration (+):** Hebrews 10:34—“You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”
- **Illustration (-):** the couple who’s been married for 25+ years, getting divorced after the kids move out → their joy was wrapped up in their identity as parents

Our identity affects our transparency and community.

- Closely tied to the previous observation, if we are not confident in who we are then we won’t be comfortable around other people (i.e., convicted or “weirded out” by those who are more “sold” on their Christ-centered identity [we may think they are “besides themselves / out of their minds / too radical” like people thought about Jesus]). Furthermore, we may avoid/dislike being around others because it interferes with our identity/image. This leads to divisions and cliques within the body of Christ.

- **Illustration (-):** a CI president who is very wrapped up in academics—he lacks the initiative and responsibility of “family” on Sunday mornings, activities, etc.
- **Illustration (+):** if Christ is our focus, then we’ll love His body, just like we say we love the “Head”

Our identity affects our sanctification and growth.

- Our identity can drive us towards a legalistic moralism or a godless license. “You do what you do and you say what you say because you think what you think. You think what you think because you believe what you believe about God, about His Word, and about yourself.”
- **Illustration (-):** If our identity is in being a “good person,” then our godliness will be skin deep and our secret sins will continue to spiral out of control; if our identity is in being a “formal [church-going / ‘faithful’] Christian,” then we may know only stunted growth because it’s just a ritual (1 John 2:12-14—knowing the Father & salvation should lead to Scriptural strength and success)
- **Illustration (+):** Jean Valjean (*Les Misérables*) wrestles with doing the right thing when another is being punished in his place (e.g., “If I speak, I am condemned; if I stay silent, I am damned”), and asks, “Who am I?” His answer is, “My soul belongs to God, I know; I made that bargain long ago...gave me hope when hope was gone, gave me strength to journey on”—this compels his to make the right decision.

Jesus is my Life; I am satisfied by Jesus Christ. → Relationship (2 Peter 1:1-4; Philippians 3:1-15)

- 2 Peter 1 (cf. 3:18) — “through the knowledge of Christ” comes “everything needed for life and godliness”
- Philippians 3 — “rejoice in the Lord” by rejecting self-righteousness and resting in Jesus-relationship by knowing Him, gaining Him, being found in Him, and benefitting from His righteousness, power, fellowship, and glory...not attained, but pressing on for that prize!

Jesus is my Lord; I am a slave of Jesus Christ. → Obedience (John 8:31; 13:14-15; Colossians 3:1-4:6)

- John 8, 13 — The disciples follow the Master’s example and obey Him!
- Colossians 3 — “Jesus-wrapped” living is distinct, righteous, excellent living.

BOTTOM LINE — Identity: I am in Christ!

THE RESULTS OF A BIBLICAL IDENTITY

Jesus is my Liberty; I am saved by Jesus Christ. → Worship (Ephesians 1:3-14; Romans 11:32-36)

- Ephesians 1 — “that we should be to the praise of His glorious grace”
- Romans 11 — responding with humility and submission; we are “put in our place”

ENDNOTES

¹ Bridges, Jerry (2012-03-02). *Who Am I? Identity In Christ* (Kindle Locations 74-83). Cruciform Press. Kindle Edition.

² Of this humbling, yet honorable term, William Barclay writes (*The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 293; emphasis in the original):

“(i) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he is inalienably possessed by God. In the ancient world a master possessed his slaves in the same sense as he possessed his tools. A servant can change his master; but a slave cannot. The Christian inalienably belongs to God.

(ii) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he is unqualifiedly at the disposal of God. In the ancient world the master could do what he liked with his slave. He had the same power over his slave as he had over his inanimate possessions. He had the power of life and death over his slave. The Christian belongs to God, for God to send him where He will, and to do with him what He will. The Christian is the man who has no rights of his own, for all his rights are surrendered to God.

(iii) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that the Christian owes an unquestioning obedience to God. Ancient law was such that a master’s command was a slave’s only law. Even if a slave was told to do something which actually broke the law, he could not protest, for, as far as he was concerned, his master’s command was the law. In any situation the Christian has but one question to ask: “Lord, what wilt *Thou* have me to do?” The command of God is his only law.

(iv) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he must be constantly in the service of God. In the ancient world the slave had literally no time of his own, no holidays, no time off, no working-hours settled by agreement, no leisure. All his time belonged to the master.”