

‘Anchored in Christ’ – Part 3: Identity

Genesis 1:20-31, Colossians 2:6-15

We continue the ‘Anchored in Christ’ series looking at identity. When planning the series in outline I thought this topic would sit in the ‘Mental & Emotional’ category, but on reflection and further research it is so foundational I now place it in the ‘Spiritual’ category (however, all the aspects overlap because we are complex, integrated beings). Identity is a big deal: with whom or what we identify defines us. We live too, in an age of Identity Politics and ‘causes’: e.g. feminism, the environment/extinction rebellion, same-sex and transgender issues (etc.).

Our focus today is what Scripture teaches about identity, and a good place to start is Genesis which means ‘origins’ or ‘in the beginning’. In the Ancient near east, the origin of something was thought to reveal its character and this is certainly true of what it means to be human.

In Genesis 1, human beings were created in God’s image. In Latin this is ‘Imago Dei’ or ‘image bearers’. In verses 24-31 (the 6th Day of Creation) land creatures were made; those that dwell on the land (animals) and humanity (male and female). Only human beings, however, were made in God’s image and so were unique. Despite what later happened (sin) these creatures were God’s pleasure and blessed. They were given dominion over the creation but within limits. They were not God, but mortal and finite.

Humans embody aspects of the divine nature and character. We have reason, language, and advanced memory; we can create order and structure and form civilisations. No other creatures can do these things, but we can only do them because we bear the impress of the creator. An object in the sun casts a shadow but the shadow constantly shifts; it lengthens, fades and ceases at nightfall. Our lives are like the shadows, but God is constant (James 1:17) – and here’s the main point: like the shadow *we have no independent existence* (an epiphenomena in philosophical terms, i.e. relying on another for our being). Many people don’t acknowledge this but that doesn’t alter the fact it is God the Creator who has put breath in our lungs and caused our hearts to beat. Our lives are known to God’s in every detail (Psalm 139).

Our Colossians reading addresses the issue of false teachers and teaching that threatened the believers at Colossae (in modern-day Turkey). I’ve included this passage because it relates to the believer’s identity in Christ. A person who confesses Christ begins the journey of discipleship, but they are implored to remain true to Christ as Lord. Greek and Roman thought contained many ideas about identity that were pagan and idolatrous (e.g. Roman emperors demanded not only political loyalty but worship as ‘god-emperor’). Paul urges his readers to be ‘rooted and built-up in Christ’, ‘strengthened’ and ‘overflowing’ with gratitude. Moreover, they need to take captive ‘false philosophy’ and ‘hollow and deceptive thinking’ – strong words! Paul knew the battleground of the mind (see Romans 12:1-3) and the need to be vigilant and wage spiritual battle (Ephesians 6). For him, false thinking (including thinking about ourselves, identity and self-concept) is anything that fails to conform to the revelation of God in Christ. The cross for Paul is more than an instrument of death but Christ’s chariot of victory as well. And here we find some clues to what it means to have our identity Anchored in Christ.

Three points in summary and conclusion:

1. *God has purposed and authored our existence.* We are not random collections of molecules and organs but purposed by God and so matter and have purpose. We are created for fruitful lives of belonging, love, fellowship and creativity.

2. *Human identity is related to the Imago Dei and as male and female.* The divine plan for the human family involves the complementarity of male and female. Gender roles may be culturally defined but biological distinctions remain primary.

3. *Having an identity Anchored in Christ is a long process of discipleship and growth.* We all face significant mind battles and the lure of ‘false philosophies’ – those that ‘lie’ to us about our identity and value as persons. These can be spiritually ‘supercharged’ and very powerful. We simply can’t resist them on our own strength. We need the power and presence of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ who is with us in the here-and-now of our everyday existence. Being in fellowship, staying accountable to each other, and keeping a soft heart towards the things of God all help in being rooted and built-up in Christ.

Questions to ponder

1. What ‘false philosophies’ (to use Paul’s term) have you embraced about yourself as a person and your identity as a believer? How can we address these to be rooted in and in proper alignment with Christ?
2. What are some of the implications for our identity of denying God as creator? If there is no God my identity is found and formed in what things?