

If You Struggle to Find Your Identity in Christ, This Could Help

We are loved. We are winners.

"I'm me and that's good. Cause God don't make no junk." –from a poster by a child in a ghetto. (source unknown)

The man said, "I think my wife's health problems go back to something in her childhood, as to how she was treated. She seems to have trouble accepting who she is in Christ."

It's always fascinating to consider what gives us our identity. And what conditions robbed us of the same.

Smart Aleck is the biography of Alexander Woollcott, drama critic for *The New York Times* many years ago. Published in 1976, the book has been gathering dust in my library, waiting for me to get to it. I started a few days ago. Woollcott is said to have been a master wordsmith, which is what made me order the book in the first place.

Woollcott came from an impoverished background and carried enough personal hangups and oddities to set him apart for the rest of his life. He was overweight, oddly shaped and egotistical. And those, goes the old joke, were his good points. When *The New York Times* hired him, that newspaper was one of eight or ten competing in that market, and not particularly distinguished. His pay was \$15 a week, and yet he was thrilled. The author says he loved being "Alexander Woollcott of the *New York Times*."

"At last," writes author Howard Teichmann, "the sense of belonging began to set in. ... Being somebody was infinitely better than being nobody."

This may be why unemployment is so difficult for everyone, but particularly for men. Their identity is so often bound up in their jobs. When men meet, they often begin with "What do you do?" The answer helps to define us, we feel, whether accurately or not.

Ministers who find themselves unemployed experience the same weightlessness, the sensation of not belonging and thus being nobody. For a long time, the minister has introduced himself as "Pastor of Central Baptist Church" or "Assistant Pastor of First Church." Suddenly, that goes away. Now, who is he?

Most God-called ministers will likely find themselves "between churches" at least once in their lives. If their self-esteem derives from the name on their paycheck or on the sign in front of the sanctuary, they're going to have a problem.

And when a flockless shepherd has this problem, his family is going to bear the burden. His wife may pay a heavy price. (So, when we pray for a dismissed pastor, let us not fail to remember the spouse and children.)

In recent days, my wife, Bertha, and I have found ourselves addressing groups on the subject of widowhood and remarriage. Women, more than men, it has been noticed and recorded and discussed ad infinitum, are more likely to lose their identity as a result of the death of their man than the other way around. We understand that, particularly for ministers and their families.

When a pastor dies, his wife suddenly finds herself faced with an entirely new set of circumstances. Not only did she lose her man, but no longer is she the minister's wife in that church, with all the respect and opportunities and baggage that role carries.

In Bertha's case, she found it easier to leave the church that Gary had been serving and attend a church of another denomination where her sister was a Sunday school teacher.

When we married, we both joined the great First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi, a congregation I served as minister of evangelism in the early 1970s. Bertha gladly admits that she loved being a pastor's wife.

Our identity often seems to be fragile and dependent on 10,000 things.

Scripture Spares No Effort

Consider this from one book of the New Testament, Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians...

- We are a fragrance of Christ among the saved and unsaved (2 Cor. 2:15).
- We are a letter of Christ written by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:3).
- We are ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6).
- We are earthen vessels containing the treasure of God (2 Cor. 4:7).
- We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were beseeching people through us (2 Cor. 5:20).
- We are the temple of God, His dwelling place on earth (2 Cor. 6:16).

And then, consider what I Peter 2:9-10 declares us to be in Christ:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may declare the goodness of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. In times past, you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. You had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Once you were not a people, said the Apostle Peter. If that

says anything, it surely means we had not found our true identity in Christ yet. But now we are the people of God.

We have found our true identity in our Lord Jesus Christ. And how wonderful is that!

One caution should be added to all this, however ...

These assurances of Scripture pertain to all the disciples of Christ, the entire body, and not as much to us as individuals. Why would we make this point?

Some who call themselves born-again followers of Jesus take such Scriptures as applying to them and their relation to Him alone, but without including the rest of the family of God. "Now it's just Jesus and me" went a gospel song of my youth. Later, some country songwriter went a step beyond and perverted it into "Jesus and me got our own thing going."

A woman told me once, "It was revealed to me that I am the church." As a result, she never joined with the body of believers in worship or service but felt free to stand outside to criticize and slander faithful workers in the kingdom—a freedom she enjoyed to the maximum, I might add.

No one person is the church. We are all members of His body.

We are somebody in Christ, yes. But we are part of the family of God. We are not lone rangers, one-man acts or hermits for Jesus. I am part of you and you are part of me.

We belong to Christ. We belong to one another—and that is the greatest identity of all, available to all who are born into the family of God. We are never alone again.

As a postscript, I love the statement from a lady identified in 2 Kings 4 as "the Shunnamite woman." After she had ministered to the Prophet Elisha on numerous occasions, he decided to reward her in some way.

Calling her to him, the prophet said, in effect, "What can I do for you? Maybe speak to the king on your behalf, something like that?" The woman answered, in wonderful understatement, "I am living among my people" (2 Kings 4:13d).

No insecurity there, no wondering who she was or what she was to do. She was secure in the knowledge her family would be there for her, that she was somebody in them.

How we wish God's children felt that way about their congregations, those families of the Lord sent to represent Him on earth as they minister and love, comfort and teach.
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