

A RADICAL NEW IDENTITY

Discovering Your Biblical Self-Image

by Steve Hixon



Life Perspectives from Fellowship Bible Church

Carl Sagan, the cosmic scientist, recently published The Shadow of Forgotten Ancestors, A Search for Who We Are, a book which seeks to understand man's problems and character flaws by delving into our evolutionary past. He writes, "We humans are like a newborn baby left on a doorstep without a note explaining who we are, where we came from, and who our parents might be." While acknowledging that we feel a need for purpose and meaning in life, he nevertheless asserts that "there is not a smidgen of evidence that there is any purpose in the universe, except of course, the natural selection process of evolution."

The Bible definitely paints a picture contrary to what Dr. Sagan espouses. We do have a great need to understand our life's meaning and purpose, and closely connected with that is a sense of our own identity – how do I fit into this world, this universe? Do I matter? Who am I?

In my life, assurance of salvation and eternal security wasn't a big struggle, but my identity was. I felt at times like my standing with God was very tentative, very conditional, that my identity hadn't changed, just my actions and activities; therefore I was hyper-involved and felt guilty if I wasn't constantly doing something spiritual. Learning about my spiritual identity (and how it relates to grace) was one of the biggest revelations in my life.

CHANGED LIVES

A major transformation in identity can be seen in the lives of well-known Christians throughout the ages. When a high-ranking Pharisee named **Nicodemus** came to Jesus one night and wanted a blessing from Jesus in some form, Jesus astonished him with the words "You must be born again..." Nicodemus hadn't counted on this. He didn't anticipate the need for such radical surgery. Like many, he probably assumed he could add on to his life whatever Jesus had to give, but instead, Christ told him that he would have to start his entire spiritual



"Christian is not simply a person who gets forgiveness, who gets to go to heaven, who gets the Holy Spirit, who gets a new nature. Mark this – A Christian is a person who has become someone he was not before. A Christian, in terms of his deepest identity, is a saint, a child of God, a divine masterpiece, a child of light, a citizen of heaven. Not only positionally, not only judicially, but actually. Becoming a Christian is not just getting something, no matter how wonderful that something may be. It is becoming someone."

David Needham, Birthright

life all over again, from its very conception. He couldn't know Jesus by learning a few new facts; he had to become a totally new person.

We see the apostle **Peter** bumbling and fumbling his way through the gospels, making spiritual mistakes as a matter of course. But when we see him in Acts and read his epistles, he seems like a different person. He still fails at times, but now sin seems to be contrary to his nature.

St. Augustine was an African philosopher in the fourth century who became a Christian in mid-life. As he returned home he was greeted by his mistress who called out, "Augustine, Augustine, it is I." "Yes", he replied, "but it is not I." He had not simply learned; he had changed.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, was emotionally troubled for years because he was confused

about his identity as a Christian, until one day he grasped the idea of justification by faith and experienced a tremendous rush of freedom. For the rest of his life, in the midst of persecution, depression and spiritual warfare, he held onto the truth that God in His grace had made him a new person.

The way we see ourselves has a profound impact on the way we live. For instance, when we look at the apostle Paul's prayers, especially in the book of Ephesians, we see that they primarily focus on asking God that He would enable the believers to see themselves as God sees them. David Needham, author of Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are? states that a key to spiritual growth and effectiveness lies in a Biblical self-image. He writes, "Functioning first generation Christians knew who they were and why they were alive."

What does the New Testament have to say? When we come to the book of Ephesians, for instance, what do we see in terms of our identity as Christians? Listen to the way Paul addresses his readers: "to the saints in Ephesus", "who once were far away, but have now been brought near", "you were dead – but God made you alive", "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus", "raised up with Christ, seated with Christ", "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord."

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

What kinds of mistakes do Christians make when they think of themselves? How do we get de-railed in our self-images? Here are some common ones:

1. “I’m perfect and unlimited”

This could be called Jonathan Livingston Seagull theology; “just think positive thoughts” and you can do anything. Like Stuart Smalley, just tell yourself, *“I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!”* While positive thinking is helpful at times, we still need to be in touch with reality, as Jesus certainly was.

2. “I am a worm”

Bruce Narramore, in Freedom from Guilt, recounts an interview with a woman in which he asked her to describe herself with ten phrases. She replied: *“I am ... a poor mother, a disappointment to my parents, overweight, unhappy, divorced.”* When he stopped her to ask if she could think of any positive traits, she continued, *“I try... to be a good mother, to clean the house...”*

When we read hymns like *“Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my sovereign die, Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I”*, it’s easy to feel like scum.

While a healthy appreciation for the terrible nature of sin is part of spiritual maturity, God never tells us to feel worthless or to dwell on such feelings. As Anthony Hoekema writes, *“Since believers now belong to Christ’s new creation, we are to see ourselves as new creatures in Christ, not just as depraved sinners.”*

3. “I’m a spiritual Little Leaguer.”

This one goes something like this: I’m like a kid on the field, and God is watching from the sidelines; like an emotional parent with high expectations, he screams from the sidelines or watches in disgust as I miss yet another grounder. Every mistake is duly noted and compared with the few successes I enjoy. There is the nagging feeling that I will never live up to His desires, and that His smile of favor is fleeting and easily erased. I am under the Law and utterly unable to satisfy its demands.

4. “I’m a spiritual schizophrenic.”

This may be the most common misunderstanding of who we are as Christians, and the one supported by the most religious literature. The idea is that once I was a sinner, but now I have added a new person to the old person. Therefore, I have two people living inside me, and I change from one to the other, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Some people describe this as having two dogs inside you, a black dog and a white dog, and we are constantly trying to choose which one is in control.

FIVE KEY PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

1. You are not the same person you once were.

The doctrine of eternal security raises the question (found in Romans 6): If Christians are secure in their

relationship with God, won’t they just sin all the more? Paul’s answer is a strong No! But his reasoning is very important to note: Grace is not a license to sin, because Christians are not the same people they used to be. The old “you” died, according to Romans 6. 2 Corinthians 5:17 echoes the same thought: *“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”*

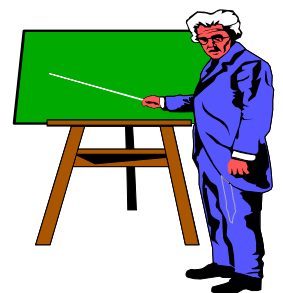
The great British expositor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was asked in 1943 when he’d preach a series on Romans, and he replied, “When I understand chapter six!” (He began the series 12 years later in 1955, and wrote 313 pages on chapter 6 alone.) He writes:

“We are to realize that we are “dead to sin and alive to God.” It is not true yet perhaps in your experience, but though it may not yet be true in your experience it is true as a matter of fact. We have got to believe it. That is why the Apostle writes in this way. This is not a matter of experience primarily; he is dealing with a matter of fact. He says you died to sin as a matter of historical fact. When you became a Christian you ceased to be under the rule and the reign and the realm of sin. That is a fact. He is not talking about your experience; he is telling you something that is true of you, namely, that you have been translated by the Holy Spirit from one kingdom to another... If I fall into sin, as I do, it is simply because I do not realize who I am.”

Believing that we have been radically changed requires faith, because it is intangible. But that is exactly what God asked of Abraham and Sarah, who were told, at age 99 and 90 respectively, that they would soon have a baby. God asked them to believe it, even though it was totally contrary to nature and experience and tangible evidence.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones uses an illustration in which there are two fields with a road running between them. The field on the left represents the old man, the old self, living in the flesh and Satan’s domination. When we come to Christ, we are transported into the field on the right, which belongs to God. Now, Satan may still call at us across the road, and he may sound powerful and convincing, but the truth is that he no longer has power over us. We are no longer Satan’s property; we no longer have any obligation to listen to him or do what he asks, although we can still choose to do so. But if we do, it is now contrary to who we really are.

In short, the “old man” represents all that we were before Christ, while “the new man” is all that we are in Christ. Perhaps the following chart will help:



OLD SELF

spiritually dead
child of Satan
living in darkness
slave to sin
in the flesh
under the Law
condemned

NEW SELF

spiritually alive
child of God
living in the light
freed from sin’s power
in the Spirit
under grace
forgiven

2. You have a new nature.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “nature” as “*The inherent dominating power or impulse by which action or character is determined, directed or controlled.*” The word “nature” (*phusis*) describing people, occurs in the New Testament only in Ephesians 2 and 2 Peter 1:

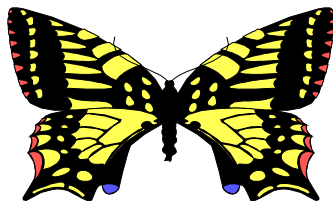
Ephesians 2:3 “*All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*”

2 Peter 1:4 “*...He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*”

These two verses are like before-and-after snapshots of a Christian. Instead of beings “objects of wrath”, deserving condemnation because of our sin, now we “participate in the divine nature”, (not that we are divine, but the fact that God now sees us as “in Christ” and possessing His righteousness). Have you noticed how “the real you” longs for communion with God, enjoys His company, and is really happiest when walking closely with Christ? The is not true of the non-Christian; it is the sign that real change has occurred deep within. Christ has given you a new nature.

At a recent breakfast the men got to hear Jack “Murph the Surf” Murphy speak about his changed life. Once a notorious jewel thief, Jack now devotes his life to ministering to prisoners. What could explain the change from a lifestyle of selfishness and greed to one in which he is happiest serving other people, giving rather than getting? It points to a heart that has been radically altered, a whole nature that finds its fulfillment in doing the works of the Father.

Paul uses an interesting word to describe this change that is going on within a Christian in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “*we are being transformed into His likeness.*” The word “transformed” is where we get our English word “metamorphosis”, which pictures the changing of a worm into a butterfly.



3. You do not have to sin.

The power and authority of sin has now been broken. Follow the logic of the Apostles: Peter says “*a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.*” (2 Peter 2:19); Paul states in Romans 6, “*anyone who has died has been freed from sin... we died with Christ... death no longer has mastery over him... in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God... for sin shall not be your master...*”

The “flesh” is defined as the lifestyle of going our own way, seeking to find life outside of God, “not man’s physical nature but his whole being as it is under the power of sin.” We can choose to walk in the flesh but now it is contrary to who we are.

Anthony Hoekema writes: “*The Christian is a person who has once and for all turned his back upon the flesh and all the works associated with the flesh, and is now walking by the Spirit. It is therefore not correct to say that*

the Christian is part flesh and part Spirit. He is in the Spirit, and has decisively repudiated the way of living called the flesh. When he does “gratify the desires of the flesh” he is going contrary to what he really is.”

4. You are under grace, not law.

“*For sin shall not be your master, for you are not under law, but under grace.*” (Romans 6:14)

You are no longer being judged and condemned by the law. Your relationship with God has changed. Now nothing you do can change who you are before God. A balanced way to see yourself is through the following three lenses: You are highly significant (made in the image of God), deeply fallen (along with everyone since Adam), and greatly loved. God is for you and there is nothing that will make Him love you more or less than he does right now. “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” (Romans 8:31)

5. God is committed to the process of changing you.

God, having saved a person, does not then just sit back, cross His arms and say, “OK, I’ve done my part. Now let’s see what you can do with the rest of your life.” He is just as involved in our sanctification as He was in our justification. He now asks you and me to be His co-workers in the process of spiritual growth.

“*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus ... Therefore, my dear friends ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*” (Philippians 1:6; 2:12,13)

Perhaps Anthony Hoekema sums it up best when he writes: “*We must understand that the Christian life involves not just believing something about Christ, but also believing something about ourselves. The something we are to believe about ourselves is that we are now in Christ, part of his new creation and therefore in a very real sense new creatures. To be sure, we are not yet totally new creatures, we do continue to slide into old ways of thinking and living, and we are not yet what we shall be. Yet Paul says, “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” already here and now. Our faith in Christ must include believing that we are exactly what the Bible says we are.*”

RECOMMENDED READING:

Neil Anderson,

[The Bondage Breaker](#)

Bill Counts and Bruce Narramore,

[Freedom from Guilt](#)

Anthony Hoekema,

[The Christian Looks at Himself](#)

David Needham,

[Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?](#)

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones,

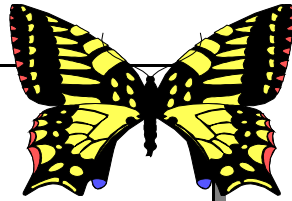
[The New Man: An Exposition of Romans 6](#)

(in his series of commentaries)



Who Am I?

The list below itemizes in first-person language who you really are and what you enjoy in Christ. You can't earn these qualities any more than you can earn or buy the rights and freedoms you enjoy as a citizen of the nation where you live. These traits are guaranteed to you by the word of God simply because you were born into God's family by faith in Christ. There is nothing you can do to make these characteristics more true of you. But you can make them more meaningful and productive in your life by simply choosing to believe them. One of the best ways to grow and mature as a believer is to continually remind yourself of who you are and what you possess as a child of God. the more you affirm who you are in Christ, the more your behavior will reflect your true identity.



I am the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13).
I am the light of the world (Matt 5:14).
I am a child of God (John 1:12).
I am Christ's friend (John 15:15).
I am a slave of righteousness (Romans 6:18).
I am a joint heir with Christ, sharing His inheritance with him (Romans 8:17).
I am a temple - a dwelling place - of God. His Spirit and His life dwells in me (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).
I am a member of Christ's Body (1 Cor 12:27).
I am a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).
I am reconciled to God and am a minister of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18,19).
I am a saint (Eph 1:1, Phil 1:1, Col 1:2).
I am God's workmanship - His handiwork - born anew in Christ to do His work (Eph 2:10).
I am a fellow citizen with the rest of God's family (Eph 2:19).
I am a prisoner of Christ (Eph 3:1;4:1).
I am righteous and holy (Eph 4:24).
I am a citizen of heaven, seated in heaven right now (Phil 3:20).
I am hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3).
I am chosen of God, holy and dearly loved (Col 3:12).
I am a partaker of Christ; I share in His life (Heb 3:14).
I am one of God's living stones, being built up in Christ as a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5).
I am a member of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Pet 2:9,10).
I am an alien and a stranger to this world in which I temporarily live (1 Pet 2:11).
I am an enemy of the devil (1 Pet 5:8)
I am born of God, and the evil one - the devil - cannot touch me (1 John 5:18).

Since I am in Christ, by the grace of God ...

I have been justified - completely forgiven and made righteous (Rom 5:1).
I died with Christ and died to the power of sin's rule over my life (Rom 6:1-6).
I am free forever from condemnation (Rom 8:1).
I have received the Spirit of God into my life that I might know the things freely given to me by God (1 Cor 2:12).
I have been given the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16).
I have been bought with a price; I am not my own; I belong to God (1 Cor 6:19,20).
I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living is Christ's life (Gal 2:20).
I have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3).
I was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blame before Him (Eph 1:4).
I was predestined - determined by God - to be adopted as His son (Eph 1:5).
I have been raised up and seated with Christ in heaven (Eph 2:6).
I have direct access to God through the Spirit (Eph 2:18).
I may approach God with boldness, freedom and confidence (Eph 3:12).
I have been rescued from the domain of Satan's rule and transferred to the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13).
I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins. The debt against me has been cancelled (Col 1:14).
I have been given a spirit of power, love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7).
I have been given exceedingly great and precious promises by God by which I am a partaker of God's divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).