

## **Living in Exile: in Search of Identity**

### **By Bob Young**

Who are you? Most human beings are in search of identity. Self-identity is an important factor in psychological and spiritual health. The world in which we live buffets us. It causes us to misunderstand and doubt our identity; it may destroy our identity.

The identity of a Christian is complex because Christians have dual citizenship, living in this world but not of this world for our citizenship is in heaven. "How am I to be identified as a human being living in this world and at the same time as a child of heaven?" As a result, the question "Who am I?" has two dimensions. A great challenge is that the two dimensions of my life correspond and reflect a single reality and identity.

Further, identity is often based on faulty perceptions. First, identity is confused because of our tendency to connect being and doing. In our culture, what we do is closely connected to who we are and how we understand ourselves. We struggle to understand the connection between who we are and what we do. When asked "Who are you?" we sometimes respond just as we would to the question, "What do you do?" "I am a preacher, or a butcher, a baker, or candlestick maker."

One result of this tendency to identify ourselves by what we do, since many of our actions have to do with life in this world, is that we identify ourselves in terms of the world rather in terms of the kingdom of heaven. Why is this important? When we identify ourselves by what we do (no matter how noble or benevolent our job or activities may be), we usually end up identifying ourselves in terms of this world and not in Kingdom of Jesus terms. We have become children of God through Jesus' suffering and resurrection, but we still identify our most basic being according to the thought patterns and values of the world. When we identify ourselves by what we do in the world rather than by who we are in Jesus Christ, it is easy to explain what we are mostly worldly-minded and too seldom heavenly minded.

Second, we are uncomfortable with an identity that appears out of step with the world's values and actions. We want to respond differently than the world but cannot stand the possible risk. One result is that we use false identity markers. We define our identity by the world's measurements—how much we have, what we can do, how much we know, who we know, or who knows us. We depend for identity on what others think of us more than on how God sees us.

The solution is that we must willfully re-establish our true identity in Christ. We are more than what we do; we are children of God; we have been re-created. "We are in the world but not of the world." As Christians, our primary point of reference is not in this world, but in the spiritual kingdom. Though we are physical beings, we are also spiritual beings, and we center our being (identity) not in the things we do or the occupations the world may use to identify us, but we center our being in our God-ward relationship as Christ did. This must be our starting point for everything we do.

To become free of our mistaken identity--our mistake in identifying ourselves in terms of the world—frees us to live in Christ. We are sanctified (made holy) by surrendering entirely to a power higher than the crowd, the Pharisees, the government, the preacher, or the boss.

We thus proclaim to all: I am free to be who God meant me to be, delivered from the world to find my true identity in Jesus. Once we are sanctified in this new identity, we more easily sanctify (make holy) all that we do and all the ways we relate to others. When we listen to Jesus we come to know the truth of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. No problem, bad relationship, disease, financial setback, bereavement, divorce, bad-mouthing, lying, abuse, or lack of forgiveness is going to keep us from our course and destiny as children of the Most High. To realize who we are in Christ is the first step in becoming who we should be in Christ.

Third, for a Christian the challenge of understanding one's true identity is intensified by our exile experience in the world. While our Christian identity is shaped by the identity of God—by the image of God stamped on us and by our creation as “image of God” people, this alien identity is frequently misunderstood and challenged by the world.

Eugene Peterson in his book *The Wisdom of Each Other* (2001) writes, “We necessarily live much of our lives in exile, so to be able to spot the people and places that reestablish our true identity is so important.” Identity is easily lost in exile. Why is it easy for a people to lose their true identity in exile? First, we are surrounded by foreign ways. We live life out of step with the customs and mores of the surrounding culture. Second, we are surrounded by foreigners who are much different than we are. Living in two worlds finds us pulled in opposite directions with a tension at times almost unbearable.

How can we maintain our Christian identity in exile? How can we Christians maintain our identity in a world where we are strangers and aliens? How can we live out our identity in Christ? Here are three helpful ideas. We can remember who we are by sharing together relationship with God and one another in worship, by recalling the biblical God-stories that are also our story, and by celebrating God's presence in our daily lives. All of these help us maintain an awareness of our identity. A fourth factor to help us remember our identity in Christ is to think about how our Christian heroes provided us examples and models as they lived out a distinct identity. The heroes of our lives are polar stars, exhibiting dependence on God's guidance, quietly demonstrating their sense of Christian identity, and calling us to God's guidance as we live out our identity. I remember in my life those who were different from the world, those who lived in the world but were not of the world. These are my personal heroes of faith (a personal application of the text of Hebrews 12). I hope you can identify and remember such heroes from your own life.

How can I be a person who models true Christian identity to others? What does a person look like when she or he is living out a genuine Christian identity? How can I be a person who reflects my true identity in Christ?

Take a few moments to think about how you reflect your Christian identity in a local church, in your family, in your daily world, and in ministry or on the mission field. Pray about becoming a more accurate reflection of identity in Christ. When we understand and live out our true Christian identity, the result is rewarding. We redeem our labor. We redeem our lives.