

# “New Identity”

John 10:14-15; Ephesians 4:17-24; Colossians 3:5-14;  
1 Peter 2:9-10 NRSV

## Who are you? Who are we?

Usually, when I sit down to begin writing one of these studies, I've got things pretty well sorted out in my mind: opening, structure, major points and themes, and so on. But not every week and certainly not this week. The subject seems straightforward: our new identity in Christ. Sounds good . . . but what do we really mean by “identity”?



We live in a time when the question of identity is increasingly thought of as an inward journey. We, or at least generations younger than mine, search for “the real me,” “the inner me,” “the true me.” Here’s a few quotes that illustrate the present-day challenge of identity:

- “I’m a stranger in my own life.” — Lang Leav, from *Sad Girls*
- “I don’t know who I am right now. But I know who I’m not. And I like that.” — Amber Smith, from *The Way I Used to Be*
- “Your identity is not in who you can be. It is in who you always have been” — Ricky Maye
- “What matters most is not 'what' you are, but 'who' you are.” — DaShanne Stokes

As I read through a lot of present-day quotes and passages about identity, I was struck by the thought that ancient peoples had an easier time with this. For the people of the ancient near-east, there was no belief in an “inner me” or a “real me” that they had to discover. A person’s “identity,” their “self” was seen in their actions and in their social position. They weren’t worried about “finding themselves” or discovering their “inner spirit;” their actions revealed the truth about their true self and others were always ready to tell them what they saw.

To this day, I suspect that for many of us, our “identities” are bound up with what we do and how others see us. For example, my identity could be centered on my marriage, “I am Angee’s husband,” or my children, or my work, or my hobbies, or . . . and the list goes on. But, there are also possibilities that are more immutable. I am also white, male, 52 years old, kind of chunky . . . and that list goes on too. Somehow, out of all this, we end up with a sense of who we are, an identity. We might be comfortable with this identity or we might be desperately anxious to change it.

### ***The new way, befitting a new life***

Let’s take a look at the above passage from Colossians. If you look at the beginning and end of the passage, you’ll see Paul contrasts two ways of living. The first way is that of immorality, lust, greed, impurity, and so on. The second way is that of kindness, compassion, humility, and so on. Paul wants these new believers to grasp that they have been reborn in Christ, they are part of a new humanity. Thus, they are to remove their old way of living and put on this new, this Christ-like, way of living. As Paul puts it, “put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it” (3:10). N. T. Wright makes a marvelous point here:

Here’s the acid test for whether Paul is talking sense or not. Read again through the list of sexual and speech-related misbehavior in verses 5–9. Then read through verses 12–17. Ask yourself this: supposing there was a town in which everybody behaved in the way described in verses 5–9. And supposing, a few miles down the road, there was a town where everybody behaved in the way described in verses 12–17. Which town would you rather live in?

There will always be some cynics who say they would prefer the first. People are free there, they’ll say. People are having a good time. All right, they may lose friends now and then. Some people who can’t look after themselves may get hurt. But they’ll be doing their own thing, living cheerful and robust lives. Whereas the other lot (the same people will say) look like a bunch of wimps.

Goody-goodies who can't stand up for themselves. Always saying 'sorry' and singing hymns. This reaction is, I think, quite common in today's world.

But a moment's thought will show how shallow such an approach would be. The practices Paul outlines in the earlier section result in communities—families, villages, whole towns—tearing themselves apart. Unbridled sexual license and untamed angry speech result in the breakdown of relationships at every level. Some people may fool themselves that they're having a good time in that atmosphere. But again and again, in moments of truth, they will admit that they are lost, confused, lonely and bitter.

Nor are the people Paul is describing in this section a bunch of weak-willed, wimpish people without much to say for themselves. Anyone who thinks that simply doesn't know what they're talking about. Have you ever seriously tried to forgive someone who has wronged you? Have you ever seriously tried to be compassionate and patient? Have you ever tried to let Christ's peace, Christ's word, Christ's name be the reality around which you order your life? If you have, you'll know it's not easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort. And people who engage in that effort tend to be people who are also capable of making difficult decisions and engaging in challenging activities in other spheres as well. Christian behavior, in other words, makes you more human, not less. Self-indulgence and habitual anger and lying may seem like fun for a while, but they destroy you sooner or later—often sooner.<sup>1</sup>

Or let's take another metaphor, this time from Jesus in John 10. He is the good shepherd, making us what? That's right, the sheep. It is only a metaphor and is limited as are all metaphors, but still. Sheep? What are we to make of this metaphor? A couple of things. First, sheep live in community. The shepherd looks after the whole flock. Second, sheep follow their shepherd. In the mid-east, that is exactly how it happens. Sheep are not driven, instead they follow behind their shepherd. The sheep are not seeking to discover some inner sheep-ness – they simply do what sheep do. And Christians do what Christians do; we follow Jesus.

### **God's own people**

The belief that we have to find our "true identity" by discovering our "inner spirit" is a burden we need not carry. As the psalmist sings, "It is God who has made us and not we ourselves" (100:3). It ought to be liberating to know that our identity is found in how we live and in the community that is God's people. Do we worship? Do we learn? Do we serve? Do we connect with others? Do we truly give of ourselves to proclaim and build for God's kingdom? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves.

The Jews of Jesus' day had a long tradition of studying God's word. They believed that this was the path to true wisdom, the way to really know God. Of course, such a path wasn't realistic for the average Joe trying to get by day to day. How could he ever hope to know God if this was the path?

But Jesus had known God simply by living in God's presence every day. He offered to everyone the opportunity to set aside their heavy "yoke" of obedience to the law, to come to know God by listening to and imitating Jesus. This "yoke" was easy and the burden light.

Jesus also wants to lift burdens from us, including the burden of thinking that we create our identity. I am not merely a disciple who fails to love as I should, I am God's. We are God's. It is in God that I find my true self...and nowhere else.

When Peter writes to the Christians, he reminds them that they are a holy nation; they are God's people. Not that they are becoming, but that they are. We are a holy people, set apart by God so that we might proclaim God to the world in everything we say and do. This is who we are. This is our identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 180–181). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.