

GOSPEL IDENTITY

Rev. Jeremiah W. Montgomery

Identity controls destiny. Whether we realize it or not, each of us spends our life acting like a novelist: selecting courses of action (our plot) for our main character (ourselves) based on who we think that character is. It is here, at this central narrative of our existence, that the gospel meets us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *an identity, defined by a destiny, that overflows into activity*.

The Gospel is an Identity

“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive,” (1Cor 15.11, ESV). The key word in both parts of this sentence is ‘in.’ It is shorthand for “in union with.” All humanity starts out in union with Adam. We are *identified* with Adam, and we face the consequences of his rebellion against God.

But the gospel offers us something better than the old identity in union with Adam. It offers us union with Christ. Union with Christ is a central concept in the New Testament. Theologian John Murray wrote, “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”¹ Is this an exaggeration? We are to consider: how often does the Apostle Paul speak of being “in Christ Jesus”, “in him,” etc.?

Union with Christ connects us to the work of Christ. Supernaturally conceived and born of a virgin, Jesus Christ is the only son of Adam who is also the Son of God. As such, he alone did not inherit Adam’s guilt or corruption. On the contrary, he was perfect: in his birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection. As such, Jesus was uniquely qualified to rescue rebels *and restart the human line*. How so? Because Jesus is God, his work is of infinite value. And because he is also a perfect man, his life and death provide something unique: a substitute record that can count for others.

How can the work of Jesus, now over two millennia past, count for people today? The answer is that God, in eternity past, elected *in advance* those whom Jesus would represent.² And just as a team captain scores goals *for his team*, so Christ’s life and death accomplished salvation for God’s elect.³ Yet this decretal union does not become an existential union⁴ – redemption accomplished does not become redemption applied – until we are *actually united* to Christ.

Actual union begins when God the Spirit regenerates and brings a person to trust in Jesus Christ. This is called ‘conversion’ or “effectually calling.”⁵ When this happens, the new Christian is “spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband.”⁶ And it is in this united-to-Christ state that Christians “partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.”⁷

Union with Christ thus gives the Christian a new identity. Instead of being identified with Adam in his rebellion, we are identified with Jesus Christ in his obedience – and in his destiny.

Do you have this new identity? Do you desire it? All you have to do is entrust yourself to Jesus. Are you unsure? There is an easy way to discard your uncertainties: stop wallowing in doubt and surrender to Jesus right now. Simply believe, and he will put his name on you (Acts 15.17, Rev 14.1). There is no need to be unclear about your identity – or your destiny.

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

² *Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC)*, #31.

³ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: in Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 58.

⁴ The present author is indebted to Rev. Jody Morris for the terms “decretal” and “existential” union.

⁵ *Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC)*, #30.

⁶ WLC #66.

⁷ WSC #32.

An Identity Defined by a Destiny

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his,” (Rom 6.5, ESV). For the Christian, resurrection life is not just a future promise. It is also a present reality (cf. Jn 5.24, Col 3.1-4).

To say that resurrection life is a present reality is to speak of *sanctification*. The rule here is very simple: as for Christ, so for the Christian, the cross must precede the crown (Mk 8.34-38). From the moment we believe, the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the master page in the providential copier machine – and we become sheets of paper sent through the machine over and over again. Through this process of heat and pressure, God applies to us the death and resurrection of Christ. In turn, we come more and more to resemble Jesus: dead to sin, alive to righteousness.⁸ Bearing the excruciating cross becomes the means whereby we are made to reflect Jesus. And in coming to reflect him who is true humanity himself, we ourselves become more truly human. Through suffering we learn to love God not simply for his *gifts*, but for *himself*. This is man’s chief end. Its rejection was and is man’s great sin. Its accomplishment was Christ’s great win. Its application is our sanctification.

The gospel is thus an identity defined by destiny. The cross precedes the crown. Yet so far begetting despair, this reality creates hope – *because the excruciation leads to the consummation*. If the cross must precede the crown, then the crown must follow the cross.

Do you struggle with this? Remember that this life, despite its luster, is a bauble compared to resurrection life (2Cor 4.16-18). Every day, a better world draws near (Rom 13.11; cf. Rev 21-22).

An Identity that Overflows into Activity

The active agent of resurrection life is God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ indwells those united to Christ (Rom 8.9). Like soup in a bread bowl, the Holy Spirit *saturates* and *permeates* believers⁹ – transforming our affections (1Jn 2.15-17), giving us the mind of Christ (Rom 12.1-2, 1Cor 2.16).

The Christian life consists in *living consistently with our new identity*. Every day we rehearse for the role of our life – life everlasting! Every day we must draw our identity not from the surrounding noise, but from our eternal destiny. When tempted to sin, we tell ourselves, “This isn’t me. Sin is no longer who I am. In Jesus I am a saint, and saints live differently.” This doesn’t mean we’re perfect. “A saint does sin. But a Christian is one who has *saint* as their constant identity and *sinner* as their occasional activity. For the Christian, there is a vital difference between *having* sin and *being* sin.”¹⁰

In Christ, we remember that there is a proper sense in which we are too good for the world. The world is no longer worthy of our affections (Heb 11.38). We put off sin because grave clothes don’t belong on the living (Jn 11.44). We seek no place in Atlantis, for we belong to a city with foundations (Heb 11.10). We have been invited to a great feast (Is 25.6, Rev 19.9), and there is no need to go dumpster-diving along the way. In Christ we are accepted: God’s verdict is in, the court is closed, and now we spend our lives doing things not to *look good*, but because they *are good*.¹¹ “The imperatives of the Bible (what you should do) flow out of the indicatives (who you are).”¹²

The essence of all this is simple. Just as we activate faith by *remembering who Christ is* (cf. Mk 4.40), so we activate resurrection life by *rejoicing in and remembering who we are in Christ*. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” (Gal 2.20, ESV).

Christian, do you believe these things? How much of your life could change today, simply by *crediting the reality* that in Christ you are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,” (Rom 6.11, ESV)? This is the *actual present reality* for every Christian. This is gospel identity. Do you believe?

⁸ WLC #75, WSC #35.

⁹ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 50.

¹⁰ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 35.

¹¹ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 43-44.

¹² Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 39.