

The Christian's True Identity

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What It Means to Be in Christ

JONATHAN LANDRY CRUSE



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Christian's True Identity

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Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

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Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 24/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cruse, Jonathan Landry, author.

Title: The Christian's true identity : what it means to be in Christ /
Jonathan Landry Cruse.

Description: Grand Rapids : Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. |

Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "An introduction to the Christian doctrine of union with Christ and the benefits of being united to Christ"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019031457 (print) | LCCN 2019031458 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781601787255 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601787262 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Mystical union.

Classification: LCC BT767.7 .C78 2019 (print) | LCC BT767.7 (ebook) |
DDC 233—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019031457>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019031458>

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For Kerri Ann,
my one in Christ

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank, at the outset, the whole host of friends and colleagues who helped make this book a reality. A number of people graciously read portions of this manuscript or the whole thing and offered helpful feedback and critique. John Fesko and Dennis Johnson were particularly encouraging during this process. Additionally, Aimee Byrd, Simonetta Carr, Drew Cruse (my dad), Bob Jackson, Michelle Reed, and Perry Westerman are to be acknowledged: their comments and suggestions have made this a much stronger work, and any remaining shortcomings are my own.

I am extremely grateful for the team at RHB (Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, David Woollin, Annette Gysen, and many others!) for supporting this work, and for their labors to get the manuscript published. They have been an absolute pleasure to work with.

Special thanks is due to the saints of Community Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, who dutifully and eagerly sit under the preaching of God's Word every week. They first heard this material as it was presented in sermon form during the summer of 2018 and were then, and continue to be, a great encouragement to this pastor.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Kerri Ann. She is truly my partner and support through all the ups and downs of life and ministry. It was with her I first mulled over the idea of this project, and it is with her that I continue to seek to live out the reality of being in Christ. No one is more faithful at reminding me of my identity in Christ than she is. For that, I am forever grateful.

UNION *with* HIM

To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

—COLOSSIANS 1:27

Who am I?

What is your initial reaction to that question? You are the person you spend the most time with and think of most often, but can you define yourself? In actuality, we are defining ourselves all the time through the decisions we make and the actions we take, in the ways we spend our time and the people we choose to spend it with, and by what we consider to be most meaningful and fulfilling in life. These are the ways in which we implicitly answer the question, Who am I? But now let's make it explicit. Let's bring it out from the recesses of our hearts and minds and shed some light on it. How would you answer? What gets to the core of who you are as an individual? What makes you "you"?

Some of us may answer it in terms of our relation to others: I am a parent; I am a spouse; I am an employer.

We might answer it based on personality: I am funny; I am slightly neurotic; I am uptight. Many of us likely think of our careers immediately when we hear the question: I am a lawyer; I am a dental hygienist; I am a freelance photographer; I am an administrative assistant; I am a dishwasher at the local diner; I am an Uber driver on the weekends. Maybe we think of our hobbies: I am a cyclist; I am a woodworker; I am a seamstress. We might answer it based on personal background: I am a Jones; I am a Canadian. Maybe we think of certain groups we affiliate with: I am a feminist; I am a Republican; I am a PETA activist. The answer might be influenced by our achievements in life: I am an award-winning author; I am a championship athlete; I am a celebrated musician. Other people's first thought might be their lack of achievements or perceived failures and shortfalls in life: I am twice divorced; I am unattractive; I am overweight; I am awkward, unpopular, and have few friends; I am a nobody.

What first came to your mind? Our initial reaction to that question reveals something deeply personal about us, whether we like it or not. It tells us what we think is the controlling aspect of our existence, what the purpose of our lives is—even if it is something we might not express openly or share with others. Ultimately, the answer to this question reveals what we believe is our identity.

The Sacred Self

In 2015, after years-long cultural debate, the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* spoke the definitive word

on legally constituting same-sex marital unions in the United States. Interestingly, Justice Anthony Kennedy opened his majority report in terms that spoke about more than just gay rights with a statement indicative of the spirit and ethos of our modern age: “The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity.”¹ In essence, Kennedy was echoing himself from another opinion years earlier: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence.”²

With these words Justice Kennedy had codified the thought of today’s average American: there is nothing more important than answering that question, Who am I? We are taught (indoctrinated perhaps?) to believe that all things are meant to serve our attempt to discover and live out our identity. The ultimate object of life is to find satisfaction and fulfillment in our self-expression.

Hence, in recent years societies around the globe have become increasingly individualistic. We live in the age of “selfies” and a “you-do-you” mentality—a time when *identity* was recently voted word of the year.³ A person’s identity, or their particular mode of self-expression, is sacred in our

1. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S. Ct. 2584 (2015), Justia (website), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/576/14-556/>.

2. *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, 505 U. S. 833, 851 (1992), Cornell University Law School Legal Information Institute, [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/quotation/\[field_short_title-raw\]_25](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/quotation/[field_short_title-raw]_25).

3. Katy Steinmetz, “This Is Dictionary.com’s 2015 Word of the Year,” *Time*, December 8, 2015, <http://time.com/4139350/dictionary-2015-word-of-the-year/>.

current context. There is nothing more important, our society says, than allowing people to identify themselves in whatever way they see fit.

The Identity Gospel

This is not just the world's problem—the church is not immune to promoting this kind of ideology either. Why talk about sin when people feel much more comfortable being told God wants them to be happy being themselves? The false “health, wealth, prosperity gospel” of the past several decades is giving way to what we might call a false “identity gospel.” This false gospel teaches that God simply wants you to be content with who you are—in your social circles, in your sexuality, in your gender expression, in whatever. As long as you are being “true to yourself,” you are being true to God. As long as you are “following your heart,” you are following God. Scripture gets twisted or tossed out to ensure that people feel no pressure to conform to any kind of moral norm—they are free to set their own course. So this false gospel preaches that man's chief end is to glorify *himself* and enjoy *himself* forever.

How fascinating it is, then, to compare this trend of the twenty-first century, and in particular Justice Kennedy's words that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence” with the opening of the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism. The first question asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer? “*That I am not my own.*”

Isn't that astounding? This catechism was a theological document commissioned by the ruler of a German prov-

ince and would go on to be learned and loved by many European Christians for centuries to come. Yet it couldn't be further from the prevailing mind-set of today. What was seen as freeing back then is viewed as being in exact opposition to the heart of liberty today. If the catechism were to be rewritten now, it might go something like this: "What is your only comfort in life and in death—that is, what keeps you motivated, inspired, and going every day?" Answer: "That I *am* my own and can be whatever and whoever I want to be, and *no one* can stop me."

While that does sound inspirational and empowering, where has this false identity gospel led us? It has led to people finding their identity in things like family, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, grades, or careers. These are things that are not wrong in and of themselves but when given such ultimate prominence in our lives, the result has been disastrous. It has led to numerous controversies that split party lines and family ties. It has led to bitter resentment and hatred toward others and deep dissatisfaction and disappointment with ourselves.

It is no wonder the repercussions can be so grave, since these are really important matters. After all, we are talking about what makes us who we are. Of course that is a crucial question—and wouldn't it be a terrible one to get wrong?

The Problem

But that is the problem. Countless people today are finding their identity in the wrong thing. They are answering that question of who they are in the wrong way. An identity that is based on relationships, job performance, or

circumstances will always come up short of giving us the satisfaction we are after. It might feel good for a while—and many can attest that it *does* feel good—but it will never last. The happiness that these identities offer is always fleeting and fading. Why?

As Timothy Keller explains, “To have an identity is to have something sustained that is true of you in every setting. Otherwise there would be no ‘you.’”⁴ So the hunt for an identity is the hunt for something that is true of me in every circumstance I am in. But we are illusory, changing beings. Our desires are constantly in flux. If we try to base our identity on any of these aforementioned transient things, we will find ourselves constantly disoriented, lost, and unfulfilled. The identity gospel falls short of giving what it promises.

Furthermore, while the quest for self-expression is often billed as being inherently freeing, in reality it proves itself to be mercilessly demanding and oppressive. In *The Weariness of Self*, Dr. Alain Ehrenberg explains why depression has become the most diagnosed mental disorder in the world: because of increased feelings of inadequacy. That is, there is an unrealistic expectation of the individual to be successful and satisfied, and anytime that is unmet (which is always), people are prone to spiral into despair.⁵ To state it simply: we put too much pressure on temporary things to give us lasting, eternal satisfaction.

4. Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 118.

5. As quoted in Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 139.

There is a story in the New Testament that teaches this tragic point: the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). What is interesting about this parable is that it is the only one in which Jesus gives one of the characters a name. The significance may be in further distinguishing these men in the afterlife. The former, who strove his whole life to make a name for himself with riches and renown, has nothing to comfort him while he is tormented in hell, and he remains anonymous. He is simply “the rich man.” But the latter has an identity. He has a name by which even God in heaven knows him—a name, incidentally, which means “God has helped.”⁶

The parable reveals to us that we are dealing with an age-old problem. Humanity has spent and will continue to spend everything in pursuit of satisfaction, in pursuit of a name, in pursuit of recognition, in pursuit of happiness. We will spend everything and gain nothing. We will search our whole lives for an identity, only to end up anonymous and unknown. “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Union with Christ

If that is the problem, then what is the solution? Let’s return to the insights of that ancient catechism from Germany: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, *but belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ*” (emphasis added). According to the Heidelberg Catechism, our hope, secu-

6. See Leon Morris, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 276.

rity, fulfillment, and satisfaction in this life can never come from us. They come from disowning ourselves and finding our all in Jesus Christ. It is not by being an unnamed rich man, but by being a person whose help is God alone. This is a radical message to hear today, but it is a freeing message. It is a life-giving message.

For the Christian, our identity is not something we earn, but something we are given. It is not something we find inside of ourselves; it is something that is intrinsically outside of ourselves in the person of Jesus Christ. He becomes our identity. The Bible is exceedingly clear on this point. Scripture sums up this profoundly important concept in just two little words: “in Him.” In other words, everything that we have and everything that we are is found *in* the person of Jesus Christ.

The technical term for this concept is *union with Christ*. It is a doctrine you may or may not have heard of before, but you have certainly read about it if you have ever skimmed through the New Testament. We never come across the phrase “union with Christ” in Scripture, but we encounter phrases like “in Him,” “in Christ,” and “in the Lord,” among others. These are favorites of the apostle Paul in particular. Once you start looking for it, you will be amazed by just how often the phrase “in Him” or one of its variations appears in the New Testament. You won’t be able to miss it! According to one trusted scholar, there are no fewer than 160 mentions of believers being in Christ.⁷

7. See Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993), 80–81.

The numbers should speak for themselves; this is an important doctrine. See what John Murray, longtime professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, had to say about the doctrine: “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* not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.”⁸

Murray was not alone in his estimation of this doctrine. Seventeenth-century theologian John Owen referred to union with Christ as the “measure of all spiritual enjoyments and expectations.”⁹ Puritan Thomas Goodwin writes that “being in Christ, and united to him, is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.”¹⁰ Reformer John Calvin said the doctrine deserves “the highest degree of importance.”¹¹ What these men understood was that the biblical evidence was relentless in impressing on us the centrality of this truth. That is, there is something here we need to grasp if we are to fully understand the riches and reach of our salvation in Christ. And I would like to put it this way: union

8. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 161 (emphasis added).

9. As quoted in Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 483.

10. Thomas Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator, in The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. Thomas Smith (1861–1866; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 5:350.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.10.

with Christ teaches us that salvation is not something we *get* from Jesus; salvation *is* Jesus.

Perhaps that seems overly simplistic, but for many believers it is a groundbreaking concept. Many of us are raised believing that Jesus is simply the *way* to salvation. But no—He *is* salvation. He is the way, but He is also the life! He is both the giver *and* the gift. He is not a means to an end; He is the end. We are not to come to Christ looking for Him to give us *something* (like salvation, sanctification, a better life—or at least a better car), but instead we are to come to Christ looking for Him. And when we receive Him, we receive everything we need. A great issue with many Christians is that we flee to Christ seeking something from Him other than Himself. Yet it is no small consolation to know that our Lord is so gracious that even when we come with other motives, He welcomes us anyway. Then His Spirit enables us, slowly but surely, to discover over time that our deepest thirst was ultimately not for His gifts but for Him.

So what this beautiful doctrine unashamedly teaches us is that Christ is truly *all* (Eph. 1:23). And when we are in Him, we have “all things” as well (Rom. 8:32; cf. 1 Cor. 3:22). Apart from Jesus we are nothing and we have nothing. But in Christ we are filled with the very fullness of God (Col. 2:9)—God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*” (Eph. 1:3). This doctrine ought to magnify our love for Christ, our desire for Him, and our adoration and praise for Him. This doctrine ought to move us to say with the apostle Paul that we

have no greater desire than to know Christ and be “found in Him” (Phil. 3:9; see vv. 7–11).

What Union Is and Is Not

To be clear, union with Christ does not mean we become Christ. It is not a form of deification where we slowly turn into gods or become one with the divine essence. This is mysticism, not the Christian religion. Nor are we literally or physically united to Him, as though we become conjoined twins attached at the hip. The biblical conception of union is manifold, but it ultimately comes down to this: it is a *spiritual* union, a work wrought through the power of the Holy Spirit.

After all, Jesus is now ascended and sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven. We are not in heaven, so how could it be said that we are united to Him? It must be through a mysterious working of the Spirit. By faith, the Holy Spirit brings us into a union with Jesus that is personal, real, vital (life-giving), and unbreakable—a union that can span even the distance between heaven and earth. John Owen explains how the whole of union hangs on the work of the Spirit of Christ when he says, “Two men cannot be one, because they have two souls; no more could we be one with Christ were it not the same Spirit in him and us.”¹² It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to be one with Christ.

It should also be noted that our union with Christ doesn’t erase our individuality. Take John and Paul (the

12. John Owen, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished, in The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 13:22.

apostles, not the musicians), for example. These two men understood the importance of union with Christ—and were both united to Christ—and yet they each had different callings, personalities, and styles of writing. Even when teaching about this doctrine, John preferred the poetic imagery of “abiding” in Christ like a branch that grows and produces fruit from a vine (John 15), whereas Paul by and large stuck with the punchy, staccato “in Him” language. So union with Christ does not make us boringly homogeneous and the same (more on that in chapter 6). What union with Christ does is takes us individually—with our own interests, hobbies, senses of humor, quirks, and all—and brings us into a saving relationship with the one Christ.

Furthermore, the doctrine of union does not render those things we often identify ourselves by—family, career, gender, sexuality—unimportant or meaningless. Far from it. Rather, our identity in Christ is a fundamental identity that claims every other identity that we could possibly have. Put another way, our identity in Christ is the lens through which every other identity becomes accountable. J. Todd Billings writes that “no part of human identity goes untouched by union with Christ.”¹³

Hence, the issue is not having a “gender identity” per se; the issue is having a gender identity that the Lord does not recognize as virtuous. Similarly, the issue would be owning a sexual identity that does not conform to the will of Christ. The problem is not having a career; the problem

13. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 11.

is making a career your crutch to get through life. Parenthood is a wonderful blessing and calling, but “mom” or “dad” is never meant to be who we are in an ultimate sense. To have an identity that is rooted in Christ will claim, cleanse, and control all other aspects of who we are. An identity in Christ will give renewed meaning, invigorating purpose, and God-glorifying direction to everything else we do in life.

The Hope of Glory

Though the New Testament, and in particular the writings of Paul, is overflowing with language of our being *in* Christ, we also find the reverse in Scripture: that Christ is *in* us. Union is, indeed, a two-way street. Perhaps this is better conveyed by using the word *communion*. In the Greek that would be the word *koinonia*, which can also be translated as “fellowship” or “sharing.” There is reciprocity between Christ and His people. Dutch theologian Wilhelmus à Brakel puts it this way: “All true believers are the property of Christ, and Christ is the property of all true believers.”¹⁴ Or, as we sing some Sundays, “I am His, and He is mine.”¹⁵

What does this mean? It means that everything that is Christ’s is rightfully ours, and everything that is ours is rightfully Christ’s. We receive His sinlessness, righteousness, inheritance, glory, and much more. He receives our sin, wretchedness, filth, weakness, poverty, judgment, and

14. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (1700; repr., Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 2:87.

15. George Wade Robinson, “Loved with Everlasting Love” (1890), in the public domain.

curse. It is by no means a fair and equal trade. Yet this is the infinite love that God has toward His chosen people in Christ Jesus: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

So it is just as important to recognize that while we are in Christ, He is in us as well. He is in us, by His incarnation. Through the incarnation, Jesus truly knows us, knows our frame and frailty, knows our weaknesses and temptations. Theologian Robert Letham writes that “we can become one with him because he first became one with us. By taking human nature into personal union, the Son of God has joined himself to humanity. He now has a human body and soul, which he will never jettison.”¹⁶

But even more astounding than that is the reality that Christ is *literally* in us through the powerful working of the Spirit: “By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (1 John 4:13). In Colossians 1:27, Paul bursts forth into praise and doxology when he declares, “Christ *in* you [is] the hope of glory.” Our eternal peace, hope, and joy rest on the fact that not only are we found in Christ but He has graciously condescended to be found in us poor, miserable sinners.

But apart from this union and communion with Christ, we can have no claim to the hope of heaven. We can have no access to the glories of Christ. Apart from being in Him, we cannot share in His saving benefits. But the very

16. Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 21.

instant we put our faith in Jesus Christ, the Spirit draws us into Christ and Christ into us and we have every spiritual blessing. Do you see how much richer and fuller your life is once you have Christ and are united to Him?

Conclusion

So who are you? What gets to the core of you as an individual? What makes you “you”? What is that one thing that is true of you in every circumstance of life?

In this book, I hope to show you that everything you need for a lasting, fulfilling identity is found in Christ—and only in Christ. I hope to dissuade you of buying into this false “identity gospel” that is becoming so prevalent in the culture and the church. I hope to show you Christ as your all in all. I want you to echo Paul’s desire to be found in Christ. My prayer for you is that your immediate, heartfelt answer to the question, Who am I? is, “I am a Christian! I am in Christ!”

To that end, each of the following chapters will take a passage from one of Paul’s epistles and show how those tiny words “in Him” make a big difference—an eternal difference. For in Him we are chosen and loved, redeemed and forgiven, cleansed and made new. In Him we are kept secure and made truly alive. This is the Christian’s true identity. It is an identity that the world cannot offer and with which the world cannot compete. Nothing but an identity founded in Christ is sustainable through all the changes of life and will satisfy even into eternity.

Are you found in Him?

Questions for Further Study

1. What first comes to mind when you ask yourself the question, Who am I?
2. In what ways does our culture view identity or personal self-expression as sacred?
3. In your own words, how would you define the doctrine of union with Christ?
4. Why is this doctrine so important?
5. What does union with Christ have to do with the concept of identity?