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## Establishing a Solid Foundation through an Identity in Christ

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## Abstract

An identity in Christ is the only solid foundation on which adolescents or adults can build their life. Identity is a major building block in a person's life. Individuals with an unhealthy identity as a result of the culture will need to make many changes to this foundation in order to keep an accurate view of their lives. The definition of identity can show examples of negative consequences of an unhealthy identity. An identity based on the views of culture can show areas of weakness. Examining what the Bible says about man before and after a relationship with Christ will help Christians see what their identity is in Christ. This will aid in breaking down the previously identified unhealthy identities in contrast to an identity in Christ as well as building the foundation for an identity in Christ. The aspects and truths found in an identity in Christ show what Christians should make as their foundation. Practical applications can be drawn from these truths to instill this identity in followers of Christ at a critical point in their life, adolescence. Student pastors and pastors may use these results in order to see the need for a correct and biblical identity in adolescents and adults.

## Establishing a Solid Foundation through an Identity in Christ

**Identity**

Eric Geiger (2008), one of the Vice Presidents of LifeWay Christian Resources, claimed that everyone is searching for a clear identity of who they are and that everyone craves to be known in others' eyes. The identity of a person and its importance has been covered by many different psychologists. Many of those that attempt to explain the developing stages in the lives of people stress at least some importance on individuals' views of themselves. This brings up the question of "Who am I?" and how individuals answer this question affects other aspects in their lives. As a result, people long to find a solid foundation in which they can answer this question. Is the solid foundation that everyone looks for found in the relationships one has, the career one has, others' beliefs of the individual, or even in the possessions people obtain throughout their lives? The answers that people give are often determined or shaped during their adolescent years. This adolescent stage in each person's life is full of change and a period of identifying oneself in order to answer this question.

**Definition of Identity**

In order to study the subject of a Christian's identity, the idea of identity involved in personality development needs to be discussed: "One's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (Weinreich, 1986, p. 317). The establishment of identity is part of a larger system of developing personality which, when complete, will affect how people think, feel, and respond to the world around them

at any given time (Stephens, 1996). Erik Erikson (1975) went into more detail on his definition of identity:

It is a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters. (p. 18-19)

According to Erikson's definition, identity formation mainly occurs during the adolescent stage and is the final bringing together of what has been given to a person with the possibilities for the future. How adolescents find their identity is through experimenting with different roles in their life situations, whether at home, school, church, or in other social situations (Identity Formation, 2011). The main purposes behind finding an identity are so that people will see themselves as belonging in society, fitting in, finding their purpose, finding the meaning of life, and reintegrating their sense of self with their newly developed body (McLeod, 2008; Stephens, 1996). Also, an individual's identity is composed of many pieces, which can include these areas: politics, religion, relationships, achievement, academia, sexuality, ethnicity, interests, personality, or physicality (Santrock, 2007). There are various theories on how people develop throughout their

lives and how identity ties in to people's development with Erikson's being a major one, but there are similarities among them.

### **Theories of Personality Development Regarding Identity**

There are multiple theories of the pattern of development in humans due to the complexity of the subject and the changing observations. Development is a culmination of biological, sociocultural, and individual factors which means that each area is affected by the other areas and just as much affects the other areas (Santrock, 2007). Development is lifelong and does not end with adulthood, and there is no dominant age during development. Development is also multidimensional and multidirectional. It spans across all parts of life and is affected by all parts which will also cause some parts to increase while others decrease during certain age periods. Development is contextual. All development occurs within context which includes any communities a person is involved in. These contexts greatly affect how a person develops, whether it is expected (i.e., puberty) or not expected (i.e., natural disaster). As a result, there are many different views of either psychologists or people with experience in the area of adolescence that give the best idea of identity and its formation in a person. The adolescence stage is a main focus. During this stage, there is a longing for independence and identity which will greatly impact the later stages of adulthood.

**Erik Erikson.** Erikson has been the most influential writer about identity in the past fifty years, and because of him, identity is now viewed as a key aspect in adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Santrock, 2007). Erikson's phase that deals with identity is known as identity versus identity confusion. During this phase, "adolescents are faced with deciding who they are, what they are all about, and where they are going in life"

(Santrock, 2007, p. 285). Erikson described the adolescent stage as a time of attempting to find an identity and searching for it with the hope of finding a new sense of self (King, 2008). Erikson said that this identity emerges from two sources: “adolescents’ affirmation or repudiation of childhood identifications, and their historical and social contexts, which encourage conformity to certain standards” (Feist & Feist, 2006, p. 255). Usually adolescents will value the view of their peers over their elders (Feist & Feist, 2006). Identity itself is defined both by positives and negatives that occur within the life of a person. This means that individuals will choose what they want to become like and what not to become like. Those who cannot find their identity suffer from identity confusion which results in them being lost in the crowd or isolating themselves (King, 2008). With the proper development of an identity, they will have faith that is more like an ideological principle, freedom to decide how to behave, trust in their peers and adults who are in their life, and confidence in their choice of possible occupation (Feist & Feist, 2006). Identity confusion includes “a divided self-image, an inability to establish intimacy, a sense of time urgency, a lack of concentration on required tasks and a rejection of family or community standards” (Feist & Feist, 2006, p. 256). This is considered normal during this stage due to the constant changes going on around people along with the struggles that will occur when trying to work out their identity. Erikson said that people must experience a time of doubt and confusion about their identity in order to get a stable identity (Feist & Feist, 2006). Too much confusion can lead to regression to previous stages in development, postponing responsibilities of adulthood.

**James Marcia.** Marcia continued to build on Erikson’s work. He described identity differently from the typical “sense,” “attitude,” or “resolution” by taking it one

step further and called identity a self-structure (Marcia, 1980, p. 159). What Marcia, when describing it in this way, meant is that identity is “an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (p. 159). The identity in an individual is dynamic and is constantly changing due to the above factors being added and discarded continually. Marcia placed importance, not on the actual identity of a person, but rather on the process of piecing the parts together into a flexible unity. Marcia said that an individual does not have a healthy identity, but has a working operation in piecing together the factors that are successful. Marcia placed the main focal point of finding identity or identity-related processes in the adolescence stage because of the changing of cognitive behaviors, psychosocial behaviors, and self-recognition. He said that finding identity-related processes does not begin or end with adolescence, but is focused mainly during this stage because “this is the first time that physical development, cognitive skills, and social expectations coincide to enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway toward their adulthood” (Marcia, 1980, p. 160). Marcia pointed out that people will experience identity crises throughout their life and only a well-developed, healthy identity structure is able to take in changes and act flexibly throughout the life of a person.

Marcia built upon Erikson’s ideas and proposed the concept of identity status in order to describe where people are in regards to their identity development (King, 2008). Marcia classified this status by two dimensions that he thought of as important: exploration and commitment. Exploration explains whether a person has explored various options for careers or values. Commitment explains whether a person has made a



decision about an identity path and made a personal investment in attaining that identity.

From these two dimensions, there are four different identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Identity diffusion occurs when a person has not explored other identity alternatives and has not made a commitment yet. Identity foreclosure occurs when a person makes a commitment to an identity before exploring other alternatives. Identity moratorium occurs when a person has not committed to an identity and is experimenting with alternative identities. Identity achievement occurs when a person has explored alternative identities and has made a commitment.

**Richard Dunn.** Dunn (2001) described the major period of forming identity as early adolescence. Dunn (2001) wrote about adolescents' search for identity: "adolescence is primarily an interpersonal research project that seeks to answer the question 'Who am I?'" (p. 166). Adolescents are focused on creating a sense of identity that is different from their parents. Dunn described more in depth the thought of adolescents as they become strangers to themselves with all the emotional, physical, and social changes. They ask, "Who am I?" and make it a challenge in adolescence to find an answer to the lifelong pursuit of their identity. The individuals will look primarily to those around them (peers, parents, and other significant adults) in order to get a definition of who they are. Adolescents during this period in their life will be growing at individual rates and unique ways. This means that, because each person is unique, there is no exact prediction for how these changes will affect the person. During this stage of identity discovery, adolescents will usually answer the question of "Who am I?" with how they compare to those around them. These answers are found in their friendships. They see themselves as "I am not who I think I am, I am not who you think I am, I am who I think

you think I am” (Dunn, 2001, p. 192). This shows the over complication that occurs during this time due to lack of experience of emotions and social aspects. Dunn also pointed out that during this time of development, there is also a spiritual journey going on that is inseparable from the developmental journey (Dunn, 2001).

**Philip Captain.** Captain (1984) categorized the identity formation phase in each person as the Unstage. Captain stressed the differences that occur between humanistic views of the stage and Christian perspectives. Captain said that humanistic psychologists view this time of self-discovery as a good time and easy task because they see people as being ultimately good, which is praised by the culture. Humanistic psychologists want people to find their identity in the positive within their own lives, as opposed to seeking out the negative. Humanistic psychologists will tell them to find only the good in their life as opposed to the bad, for example looking at good things in their life and ignoring whatever is bad or negative. Christian psychologists will be sure to see what the Bible says about self and how man is innately sinful and evil because that is what needs to be brought up.

**Larry Stephens.** Stephens (1996) wrote that it is crucial that adolescents establish their identity during this time because it is the main focus. The adolescent wants to know not only the answer to “Who am I?” but also to “What is my purpose in life? What is the meaning of life?” (Stephens, 1996, p. 125). The result of finding this identity is supposed to solidify himself or herself as a separate person and a person of worth in society so that the transfer to adulthood can be successful. The result of not attaining this identity is role diffusion which is when adolescents cannot get a grasp on who they are, why they are there, or what life is about (Stephens, 1996).

**Importance of a Healthy Identity**

The common personality development structure is usually pictured as building a pyramid in which one base builds upon the previous. If one area or stage of development is not handled correctly, there will be consequences seen later with the other stages. As described above by many researchers, the main time in people's lives when their identity is formed is when they are in their adolescent stage. This is early in the life of typical people and, unlike the previous stages, the forming of identity is a mixture of self-reflection, the context they live in, the friends they have, and choices they make. This is the first stage when these areas come together and needs to be worked out in order to have a healthy future. Those that end this stage with a healthy commitment to an identity tend to be happier and healthier as opposed to those who do not have a set identity. Those who do not set their identity will feel out of place in the world or will not feel as if they really know themselves (Cherry, n.d.). Dunn (2001) went on to describe an "inner early adolescent" in each high school student, college student, and adult, and as a result, the identity formation that occurs prior to those stages has a profound impact on the rest of a person's life (p. 180). Erikson's model flows from adolescence, the identity formation stage, to the young adulthood stage. Jess and Gregory Feist (2006) explained Erikson's model, "after achieving a sense of identity during adolescence, people must acquire the ability to fuse that identity with the identity of another person while maintaining their sense of individuality" (p. 257). This fusing makes it even more important because they are now influencing someone else with their identity and need to know how to respond to this change in identity (Feist & Feist, 2006). Also, during the later stages in life, individuals are looking back and evaluating their past stages. If there are stages that were

resolved negatively or unhealthily, the result would be “doubt or gloom” (King, 2010, p. 298). One of the key features in the emerging adulthood stage is identity exploration where individuals will have significant changes to their identity as a result of love and work. This emerging adulthood stage is approximately based around 18 to 25 years of age which is later than was typically seen by Erikson or others. The growing trend seems to have been established by the culture. People will prolong maturity and with that comes a delay in identity formation (King, 2010).

Aside from the future stages of development being affected by the identity formation process, there are many other areas that can be affected. All later stages that are affected by identity formation will be affected by an unhealthy identity. Marcia (1966) performed an experiment relating the identity status to other variables. The results of the experiment brought up how each status reacted. Participants that were classified in the status of identity achievement performed better than other statuses during stressful testing, and their self-esteem was not as vulnerable to change when given negative information (Marcia, 1966). Marcia also determined later that better developed identity processes made individuals more aware. These individuals appear to be more aware of their own uniqueness, similarity to others, and of their own strengths and weaknesses in being a part of the world. On the other hand, those with less developed processes are more confused about their distinctiveness and rely more on external sources to evaluate themselves. This caused a problem when culture is bombarding people with messages about who they are. A conclusion that is drawn is that an unhealthy identity results in a lower self-esteem and individuals succumbing to more lies that are told to them by those around them (Marcia, 1980).

Lee Vukich and Steve Vandegriff (2002) gave four reasons for the imperativeness of the self-identity in a person. The first reason is that people must develop an adequate self-image is to guide the future construction of adulthood. Their future adulthood rests on this identity that they build. Secondly, people will go through many troubling situations and their choices will be made based on these. Someone with an unhealthy identity will be manipulated to make choices and will not be able to stand up to outside pressures. Thirdly, the self-identity is essential in finding a satisfying life vocation. Lastly, Vukich and Vandegriff described those with an unhealthy identity as confused, disoriented, and uncertain about their futures.

Identity crises are not confined only to adolescence. They can take place throughout the life of a person, usually when there is great change in a person's life or even when key stages in a person's life are full of instability (Cherry, n.d.; King, 2010). This means that people will need to adjust their identity to the new found changes in their life. This can be a new relationship or a death of a loved one or divorce. When situations change dramatically, an unhealthy identity will not be able to support a change. A changing foundation is never stable. Since the later stages of development are based on a healthy identity, these later stages will be affected and drastically changed and will no longer be secure. As a result of all the structures and other traits that are affected by the identity of an individual, a healthy identity must be formed in order to live a full life. The result of people not completing their personality development results in chronologically mature but emotionally immature lives (Stephens, 1996). But, this identity, as a result of a constantly changing and unpredictable life, needs to be constant, never changing. Marcia said that identity is dynamic and is always being added to and discarded from

because major factors are context and relationships (Marcia, 1980). For Christians, this means that if there is not a healthy identity built on truth, they will not live out the full potential that God has for them and remain an adolescent in the faith as well as wander through life merely existing instead of living the reality of who God called them to be. Those that build a healthy identity will grow in their faith which will positively affect them as well (Geiger, 2008). But, for Christians, God has provided an identity that is healthy and constant because it rests on Him who is immutable. In order to get to this identity, it is important to point out what this identity is not, and that is what culture teaches on identity.

### **Where People Find Their Identity**

Robert McGee (2003) opened up his discussion on the identity of a person by showing where man goes wrong in finding identity:

Since the Fall, man has often failed to turn to God for truth about himself. Instead, he has looked to others to meet his inescapable need for self-worth. *I am what others say I am*, he has reasoned. *I will find my value in their opinions of me.* (p. 19)

Feist and Feist (2006) emphasized the cultural influences on the neurotic and personality development. Culture is constantly telling people what they need to believe about themselves through many avenues. One of the major avenues is media which affects adolescents during the important identity formation process because they are fooled into believing what they see which caused destructive results (Mueller, 2007; Vukich & Vandegriff, 2009). People learn through observation, and media shaped the culture which caused social ramifications in individuals and their identity. Mueller (2007) stated that it

is impossible to be unaffected by media because it affects all areas of life. Mueller also stated that individuals will become like chameleons to fit in and find a place to belong so they blend into the surrounding environment. This results in a culture where the media says the following: those with beauty are of worth; avoid pain and pursue pleasure at all costs; sex is recreational and there are no consequences because everyone does it; violence is an acceptable way to deal with problems; it is accepted to use people for any purpose; and money brings happiness, so hold onto as much as possible. It is important to break down what culture says about an individual's identity in order to confront it and show how these bases for identity are unhealthy.

### **What Culture Says About Identity**

David Swanson (2012) summarized his view of the culture:

According to our culture, we should know who we are: we are bearers and creatures of our own light. We are little gods unto ourselves. We know what is best for us. We know what is true for us... our own "heroic being" with our happiness as our only purpose. (p. 19)

Throughout the establishing of an identity, while there is importance to self-knowledge, their identity is mostly focused around social comparison or the comparing of the self to those around him or her in order to evaluate oneself (King, 2008). Also, after the results from Asch's Conformity Experiment, some individuals will conform even if they know they are right and others are wrong, and the power that culture has on some individuals conforming to it is strong. Mueller (2009) organized some areas that culture has as identity bases.

**Cultural Identity Bases**

**Romantic intimacy.** Walt Mueller began with the category of romantic intimacy in which students find their identity in their love interests or sexual partners. Mark Driscoll (2013) focused on the results that occur when individuals focus their identity in relationships with others and this result is unhealthy relationships both independently and dependently on others. This is an unhealthy identity because the person will become emotionally dependent, controlling, and will begin to view others' identities as pure objects (Mueller, 2009).

**Academia and achievements.** Another category that Mueller brought up is that individuals will find their identity in their academic or athletic achievements and this is where their value is found. Driscoll (2013) addressed this topic by saying those that find their identity in achievements will always search for something to excel at to show superiority. A common misconception that McGee (2003) described is that success will bring happiness and fulfillment. The results of this identity is someone so focused in these areas that they become shallow and isolated, and if something goes wrong then they will view themselves as a failure which may lead to depression or other devastated, emotional states (Mueller, 2009). McGee (2003) also described the other results that this identity will bring: perfectionism, avoiding risks, anger, pride, depression, low motivation, success addiction, and hopelessness. McGee said that these results are possible if people who find their identity in success, fail or do not attain their goal.

**Possessions.** In addition, Mueller stated that people find their identity in their possessions. Mueller (2007) observed a group of adolescents that were discussing sports players and their salaries. They admitted that they would be willing to get rid of whatever



they have in order to obtain money, fame, and celebrity status. Many individuals find their identity in what Mueller described as “I am what I have” that is based on the culture around them and results in false views of materials. Driscoll (2013) noticed that people own possessions that project their desired image. Consumerism has taken control of America. It tells people who they are and drives them to gain status. Possessions culminate and maintain the identity. Individuals today believe that material possessions bring happiness, money buys those possessions that bring happiness, and possessions brand them as *cool*. As a result, they ignore the self-centeredness that comes along with the love of possessions, and this leads to people never having enough (Mueller, 2007). As a result, because the brand people wear makes them who they are, the name on the shirt, the shoes they wear, and the car they drive are vital to living (Dricoll, 2013). This leads to a drive to obtain the best possessions among their peers and may result in unethical patterns to get these possessions, but eventually life will be full of worry or jealousy of others’ belongings, and a minor change financially will break down this foundation (Mueller, 2007; Mueller, 2009).

**Pleasure.** Mueller addressed the identity that can be found in pleasure, gratification, and comfort. Culture teaches people to avoid pain at all costs and to pursue pleasure, so adolescents will do what feels good to them (Mueller, 2009). This can easily lead to a dependency on drugs, and Mueller (2009) even said, “you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the ‘escape-strategies’ by which you avoid the hardness of life” (para. 13). At some time this will lead to a destructive lifestyle and they will eventually have their foundations destroyed when they do not find pleasure in drugs or other gratifying objects.

**Relationships.** Mueller's next category is when individuals find their identity in relationships with others and approval from these relationships (Mueller, 2009). In the culture today, media says that beauty sells and as a result, beauty is required to be accepted (Vukich & Vandegriff, 2009). Mueller (2007) recognized that media sets beauty standards that are widely unattainable and, as a result, rips people apart mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. A great example of this that Mueller gave for this category is from the movie *Mean Girls* (2004). In this movie, girls are criticizing themselves and hoping that their friends will tell them their flaws are not there (Mueller, 2009). These are also known as status symbols and what these individuals are known by, whether it is their clothes they are wearing or the groups they identify with, shapes who they are (Bellows, 2007). This helps with adolescents' need to feel affiliated or accepted by a specific group as a result of the constant peer pressure to fit in and be a part of a group (Vukich & Vandegriff, 2009). McGee (2003) encompassed what those that have an identity in their relationships would say about their identity: "I must be approved by certain others to feel good about myself" (p. 54). These individuals always end up getting hurt by criticism and losing friends because they become useless to their friends, not giving or getting criticism. But, when individuals are forced to move away from all their known relationships, their whole foundation is broken down (Mueller, 2009).

**Noble causes.** Mueller's next category is in noble causes where many individuals seek to make a difference in the world and begin to conform to that cause. This leads to demonizing those who do not share the same causes and as a result become controlled by their enemies. When there is no longer an enemy, the foundation is destroyed because there is no longer a purpose.

**Religiosity and morality.** The last category that Mueller described is religion and morality. All humans have been equally spiritual since the beginning of time, but the adolescents today are more conscious and overt about it. If they are not able to live up to their own standards or the standards put forth by the religion, they will suffer from devastating guilt, but if they keep the standards they will become prideful and self-righteous.

Each of these false identity bases can easily be affected by any major or minor change in the life of an individual. If people have an identity that is formed on the basis of a changing foundation or factors that are constantly changing, their identity is not a healthy one because it will always be changing. As a result, adulthood that follows would be built on an unhealthy identity and will not be based on a solid foundation. This will cause devastating effects in the life of the individual when a minor or major change happens. Feist and Feist (2006) noticed contradictions that occur in common Western society that include humility in a culture of aggressive competitiveness, endless demands for success and achievements, and a society that says people are free to do what they please as long as they try hard when there are biological restrictions. Feist and Feist then noticed the conclusion of these contradictions resulting in threatening psychological health and providing insurmountable obstacles for neurotics. Lastly, Swanson (2012), continuing from the quote at the beginning of this section, further broke down the fault in culture's view on identity:

At least that's what we're told. In the end, however, how could that possibly work? Knowing what I know about myself, my own flaws and failures, how could

I ever be the source of my own identity or being? The self is never enough; yet that is the message of our time. (p. 19)

### **Where Christians Need to Find Their Identity**

Christians, according to Stephens (1996), say that the main reason people search for identity is a result of the urges that were given to them by the Creator. Christians struggle with an unhealthy sense of self as well that is brought on by the culture. Satan continues to deceive Christians into believing that the basis of their worth is their performance, what culture is telling them about their identity, and their ability to please others (McGee, 2003). As a result, Christians are not building their house on the Rock, but rather they are building their house upon the Rock with sand on top. Christians are not resting on and owning their identity that was given to them through Christ, but are rather looking to culture as to where to get their identity. Swanson (2012) described how Christians need to go about finding their identity since they believe that God has made them. Swanson said that if Christians are ever uncertain about who they are or how they fit in this world, then they should seek out the most effective resource, the Creator, and see what He tells them about themselves. The identities of Christians are found in their union with Christ which God has told through the Bible, mostly through Paul. Paul expressed this identity throughout his epistles with the phrase *ἐν Χριστῷ*, or *in Christ*. James Boice (1986) stated “Union with Christ by means of the Holy Spirit is not a peripheral matter in biblical theology, although it is widely neglected” (p. 389). A.W. Pink (2010) offered a more pronounced comment on this topic:

The present writer has not the least doubt in his mind that the subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and...the most blessed of any that

is set forth in the sacred Scriptures. Yet, sad to say, there is hardly any that is now more generally neglected. The very expression “spiritual union” is unknown in most professing Christian circles; and even where it is employed, it is given such a protracted meaning as to take in only a fragment of this precious truth. (p. 1)

Without a clear, biblical emphasis put on a search for identity, Christians will fall short of what God has intended for them and fall into what the culture says about their identity which has been shown to be unhealthy and harmful. Hull (2006) described what happens when Christians repent in relation to their identity, “becoming a Christian is a demolition of one’s identity” (p. 214). If the previous identity is destroyed a new one must be built, but there is a reason for the identity being destroyed. This reason is so that the believer will not have an unhealthy identity that culture or self puts on them, but rather finds the healthiest identity in Christ (Hull, 2006).

### **In Christ**

The identity in Christ can only be found in those who have trusted in Christ for salvation because of the truths that come with it and the position itself being attainable only by those who have repented and turned to Christ (Towns, 2006). There are two ways of looking at an identity in Christ. The first as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (2010) pointed out is objective which means those that view it this way view it as just a position that one takes for salvation. While it is definitely true that Christians are united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, Lloyd-Jones also continued and said that this is not far enough. Christians must make it a part of their current life, not just their future glorification through Christ because it affects them as well in the present. For Christians, it is not about earning this identity or working to obtain it as typical with culture’s

identities, but rather it is bringing to light what truth is told to Christians by God in the Bible. Driscoll (2013) said that Christians suffer from an identity crisis and are continually forgetting who they are in Christ. As a result, they are asking “Who am I?” and are being pulled into what culture says about them in order to answer that question. Christians forget where their foundation is, the Rock. Christ is the Rock in a Christian’s life because Christ and His teachings are what Christians are to base their lives on (Matt. 7:24-27). As a result of forgetting this identity, they try to build their own foundation on top of the Rock because they have forgotten about that foundation. This new foundation is taken from what culture says, the sand, and as a result, during the storms in life, these Christians will be shaken and torn. Christians need to be shown that they already have the healthiest foundation, the Rock, and do not need another foundation on top of it. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones (2010) even mentioned that the understanding of oneself as in Christ is basic, fundamental, and primary to the Christian faith and even claims that this understanding is Christianity.

**Breaking down the words.** Before looking into the characteristics of someone being in Christ, it is important to look into the words themselves and the meanings they have. In Christ has a vast majority of meanings throughout the New Testament, whether it is all things being created in Christ (Col. 1:16) or believing in Christ (Acts 16:31). And Paul even used it differently some times, but throughout Ephesians Paul used the phrase in Christ as shorthand for being united with Christ (Bridges, 2012). The phrase is used throughout Ephesians and, while there are different meanings of the phrase, he used different words in the Greek that would relate more to what he meant as an identity. While the Greek word for Christ stayed the same or was substituted for a pronoun or

another title for Christ, there are two other differences. These two differences are the word *ἐν*, as opposed to *εἰς*, and being used in the dative form.

The word *ἐν*, as defined by Strong (2007), has the meaning of being a preposition that normally denotes a fixed position, not moving but rather resting. This is interesting because apart from these other uses of in Christ that are typical, they usually use the word *εἰς* which means to or into dealing with a place, purpose, or time. This word is typically implying motion and is used when referencing going into a place whether it is Jerusalem, a house, or some other place. So, it is interesting to see Paul use *ἐν* in this case because he is using the intermediate between going into a place, *εἰς*, and going out of a place, *ἐκ*. What Paul got across to his audience is that this is a position that they are currently in and they need to remember. Thayer and Wilke (1889) gave a good definition for one of the specific uses in Ephesians when they describe it as “of that in which any person or thing is inherently fixed, implanted, or with which it is intimately connected” (p. 211). This helps explain how Paul can use this to replace union with Christ because these words are describing an intimate connection with a person. But, Thayer and Wilke (1889) gave more meaning to this phrase when they broke it down even more:

Of a person to whom another is wholly joined and to whose power and influence he is subject, so that the former may be likened to the place in which the latter lives and moves. So used in the writings of Paul and of John particularly of intimate relationship with God or with Christ, and for the most part involving contextually the idea of power and blessing resulting from that union. (p. 211)

This definition pairs well with what Jesus told the disciples in the upper room discourse on how those that abide in Him will produce fruit and only through abiding in Him.

When Christians abide in Him, they understand what it means to be in Christ because they are drawing from the power of Christ and, as a result, will be sanctified into the image of Christ. These two words that are so commonly seen throughout the New Testament, in Christ, pull so much weight behind them in the context Paul is writing about in Ephesians. Clinton Arnold (as cited in Driscoll, 2013) spoke on the importance of Ephesians when he said, “Paul wrote this letter . . . to affirm [the Ephesians] in their new identity in Christ as a means of strengthening them” (p. 18). Also, Klyne Snodgrass (as cited in Driscoll, 2013), said “the main purpose of Paul’s letter is ‘identity formation’” (p. 18).

The context in which Paul wrote to the Ephesians also played an important part in understanding these words. It is important to look first at the people in Ephesus and the church itself to see why Paul wrote. The book of Ephesians was written and delivered with a set of other letters that included Colossians and Philemon. This helped explain the lack of a problem that needed to be addressed in Ephesus like the other epistles because Paul was addressing a problem in Colossians and the two cities are around 100 miles apart (Driscoll, 2013; Towns & Gutierrez, 2012). Paul also seemed to think that these people needed some encouraging due to the young faith that was present there (Driscoll, 2013). There was also a constant thread throughout the book of Ephesians when dealing with the identity of the people there. The breakdown of the whole book can be seen as the wealth of the Christian (Eph. 1-3), the walk of the Christian (Eph. 4-6:9), and warfare of the Christian (Eph. 6:10-23; Towns & Gutierrez, 2012). Once the teaching of who the Ephesians are was given in Ephesians 1-3, it then told the Christians how they should live as a result of this identity. This was new to the believers there and was meant to



encourage them through the warfare that was occurring around them. There are four major categories to describe what it means to be in Christ: baptism, new creation, adoption, and new confidence.

**Baptism.** The first category that occurs in the lives of Christians that shows their identity in Christ is baptism. Baptism is pointed out as opposed to salvation not because baptism is necessity for salvation, but this is the outward expression showing the inward change that occurs as a result of the Holy Spirit reproducing the death and resurrection of Christ in the life of a Christian (Grudem, 1994). This is where Christians understand their unity with Christ first in their walk because it is tangible and done to them. One area where this is explained is in Romans 6:3-11 in which Paul built on what was previously mentioned in Romans 5 concerning where life comes from, Christ. So, Paul continued his addressing the situation in Rome with sinning (Rom. 6:1-2) by showing the Romans their identity in their baptism which shows their salvation. Believers need to recognize that they have died to sin in their life (Rom. 6:3-11). Paul constantly repeated the death that has occurred in each believer's life to sin and themselves just as Christ has died for the payment of sins. This is represented in baptism by the immersion into the water to represent the death and burial just as Paul mentioned and compared to Jesus' death and burial in order to show the union between the Christians and Jesus. As a result, Christians need to recognize that they need to die to the idols of sin in their life that are controlling their identity. But, it does not end there. Throughout the same verses, Paul contrasted the death with the resurrection of Christ. Since the believers have died to their sins, they have taken the union with Christ also in His resurrection, both for future glory with the Father and also for living in Christ. No longer are Christians tied to being a slave to sin, which

Paul addresses in Romans 3, but they are now in union with Christ in His resurrection to new life. This leads us to the next category: new creation.

**New creation.** “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17, English Standard Version, emphasis added). This old creation is gone. God, and Paul, unlike culture, did not address these Christians based on their past sins. Before touching on what it means to be a new creation, it is important to understand what it means to be a creature first. God has created man and has created man uniquely. No two people have the same fingerprints or personalities. Also, as a creature, man is dependent on the Creator (Ps. 145:15-16). Man is also naturally a sinful creature and a slave to sin as a result of the Fall (Rom. 3). Being a new creation means that God has renewed these truths. God has kept Christians unique by the Holy Spirit giving unique spiritual gifts in order to have a unique identity to bring glory to God (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12; Dunn & Sundene, 2012). Christians are still dependent on God for salvation. Lastly, Christians are now no longer viewed as sinful creatures and are not slaves to sin because, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to take off the old self (Col. 3:9-10; Hoekema, 1994). But, because of the new creation that has occurred, they are now a slave to righteousness (Rom. 6:15-23) that is not perfect, but is being progressively renewed. Just as the old self was put away, so the identity of a Christian prior to trusting in Christ should be stripped and never returned to. The Christian is now a new creation and, as a result, has a new identity which is in Christ because of the truths that are told to him or her in the Bible. These truths change

Christians' perspectives about themselves which adjusts their identity. Another name for this new creation that occurs in the life of a Christian is new birth. This idea of new birth is how Jesus explained being newly created to Nicodemus (John 3). Boice (1986) explained the meaning of a new birth, "the birth of a child of God is a spiritual resurrection, the passage of one into new life who formerly was dead in trespasses and sins" (p. 401). Also, Boice (1986) explained the passage of 1 Peter 1:23 as God plants in the heart and sends forth a seed which results in the conception of a new spiritual life comes into being. It is further thought of as a new birth because regeneration is not the whole of salvation and should not be seen as an end. As a result, the necessity for a new identity is shown so that it replaces the old identity that has been put away. With this new birth also comes adoption into the family of God.

**Adoption and change in relationships.** "Only adoption suggests the new family relationship which is ours in Christ and points to the privileges of that relationship" (Boice, 1986, p. 442). Adoption into the family of God brings a new position, new relationships, and new privileges. The new position that is a result of this adoption is the new position of being made into good standing with God legally. This is also known as being justified. Justification is the declaration of a person to be righteous which occurs when a person trusts in Christ (Towns, 2006). How God does this justification is by Jesus taking the sins of the person on himself on the cross and when the person is in union with Christ, Christ's righteousness is placed on the person, so that they are viewed as righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). As a result, the identity in Christ is not based on the works of the Christian as it is in the culture, but their identity is found in the works of Christ and the new position they have as a result of being in Christ. Not only is it a new position before God

legally, but it is a new relationship to both God and man. God, through adoption, has made the Christian a member of His family (Grudem, 1994). Galatians 4:4-7 states:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (English Standard Version)

This passage shows the adoption that occurs through salvation. Christians are now declared as sons to God. During this time, it was a patriarchal society that gave inheritance to the brothers (Douglas & Tenney, 2011). This is also seen in Galatians 4:7 where Paul made the transition from sons to heirs. As a result, God views those that are in Christ as having the position of Christ, a son that is deserving of inheritance from the Father. Yet again, this is not based on works of the person, but is based on the works of Christ. Christians only get inheritance and are claimed to be sons only through Christ (Galatians 4:4-7). This is distinct from justification being sure to show that God could have declared Christians as justified and not sons, like angels, but He chose to graft them into His family in order to establish a Father-child relationship. As a result of this, there are certain privileges given to His children that will be addressed later. The change in relationship from a child of wrath to a child of God comes with an identity in Christ, no longer rejected, but accepted by the Father who will never leave his children (Driscoll, 2013).

Along with this change in relationship, there is also another relationship that is changed. This identity in Christ also changes the relationship of Christ and Christian to

groom and bride. Marriage is the representation of Christ's relationship to the church (Eph. 5:25-32). Geiger (2008) said that Jesus has declared the church as His bride which is the highest expression of commitment between two people in order that He would show His commitment to Christians. Marriage during biblical times was usually arranged by the parents and in this case the Father has chosen for the Son a bride and has redeemed her. Also, during biblical times, the groom took responsibility over the wife which included holding the family together, providing security, and protecting the wife and children (Douglas & Tenney, 2011). This is the same for Christ doing these for His bride. Identities and relationships are inseparable and, instead of it being based on fallen relationships, in Christ is wrapped up in the reality of the relationship between Christ and his bride (Geiger, 2008).

Not only does this change the relationships between man and God, but it also changes the relationship between man and church and man and unsaved. The relationship of man and church is changed as a result of this identity in Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) said that Christianity means community in Christ and Christians only belong to one another through their identity in Christ. Apart from being in Christ, there is no hobby, characteristic, trait, possession, or relationship that would be able to unify them. "Jesus Christ alone is our unity... Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another" (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 39). This is the only point that the church has in common and the church can have fellowship as a result. And if a person is in Christ, he or she will seek Christ-centered relationships full of love with fellow believers because of Christ.

The last relationship that changes as a result of an identity in Christ is the relationship between the Christian and the unsaved. Those that are in Christ are ambassadors of Christ and are aliens to this world. Second Corinthians 5:20 says “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (English Standard Version). After Paul addresses them as new creations, he calls them ambassadors. As ambassadors of Christ, people need to be going out and making appeals to the unsaved to come to God and to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to work through them and represent Christ in the culture. They are not just ambassadors, but also aliens in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). As Christians, they are called to be different from the world around them. This includes where Christians find their identities. While those without an identity in Christ are seeking the approval of others and are seeking to be branded by their possessions, those with their identity in Christ will not base their identity in these idols or others that culture proclaims. They are also called to live differently from the world.

The last area that changes as a result of adoption is the privileges that come with adoption. Jonathan Edwards (2010) said that Christians only have the rights to Christ’s benefits through being in Christ. The benefits that come from being grafted in Christ are seen throughout Scripture. Jesus, in John 15, talks about the vine and the branch and compares it to bearing fruit as Christians. Apart from abiding in Him, there are no benefits but from Him. All good is from Him. There are some specific privileges that occur as a result of being in Christ. Some of these privileges are the ways that God relates to Christians as sons. First, the privilege of speaking to God through prayer is one of the greatest, and it is not just speaking to Him, but speaking to Him as a Father (Grudem,

1994). Jesus gives the model prayer in Matthew 6 and opens it with “Our Father.” As a Father He loves and understands His sons. Another privilege is that God disciplines His children (Heb. 12:5-6). From this, those that are in Christ, have the privilege of sharing in Christ’s sufferings and glories (Rom. 8:17). This combats culture when pleasure and gratification are worshipped. This identity in Christ will help seek what Christ says and try to obey Him and the Father will lovingly correct them in the times that they need it. Another privilege is being endowed with the Holy Spirit (Boice, 1986). Only those that are saved will have the Holy Spirit in them empowering them and strengthening them to go through life’s struggles and to continually be His ambassador. With these new privileges comes new confidence in the one who gives them.

**New confidence.** The last major category that shows the result of an identity in Christ is the confidence in the Father as being justified, a new creation, and adopted into His family. Being justified brings assurance as Christians stand before God based on their new identity (Boice, 1986). Boice (1986) said, “when we approach God as Father, being taught and led to do so by God’s own Spirit, we know that we stand in a secure relationship” (p. 447). What this shows is that those that find their identity in Christ have a secure relationship to base their identity off of and it will not change. Those in Christ will also have confidence in the Father because they can trust that He will take care of them (2 Cor. 12:14), guide them (Eph. 5:1), and they will know that they belong to Him forever (Rom. 8:29-30; Boice, 1986). In Philemon 1:8, Paul tells them the result of his confidence in the Lord, boldness in correcting self and others. Confidence will bring boldness in life and living in Christ.

**In Christ Characteristics in Ephesians**

Each of these categories is seen throughout Ephesians and as a result, is a perfect encouragement to the newer believers in Ephesus to find and rest in their identity in Christ. The first three chapters are based around the identity in Christ and who the Ephesians are. Prior to looking into the text, it is clear that Paul tried to emphasize the phrase *in Christ* because he repeated it 34 times in some form throughout the book of Ephesians (Driscoll, 2013).

Ephesians 1:1 “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful *in Christ Jesus*” (NASB, emphasis added). The term here is *in Christ Jesus*, which is referencing the state of those saints in Ephesus that are faithful. This does not mean that they are the only ones who are in Christ. Rather, it is Paul’s address to those to whom He was writing. He was giving a description of those He was writing to. These people are in Christ which results in being saints and faithful. It is important to point out that Paul opened up his letter with this phrase of describing God’s people because it sets the tone for the later references and he wants to instill this into their minds as their identity so he calls them what God calls them. Paul never addressed the people in the church as their past experiences, but rather addresses them as their current position in Christ. As a result, this usage of *in Christ* is saying that Paul wrote to the Christians known as being saints, faithful, and in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3-4a “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ* just as He chose us *in Him* before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him” (NASB, emphasis added). The first word that is seen that described those



that are in Christ is *blessed*. This falls into the characteristic of having privileges as a son of God. They are in Christ and as a result they are blessed with every spiritual blessing. The next characteristic that is taught about their identity is salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that those in Christ, because of verse 1, are chosen by God to be made holy and blameless. Frame (2013) said that those who are saved are chosen in Christ because Christ is the one who secures the holiness and blamelessness for us that far in advanced. As a result, this shows that there is absolutely nothing that will separate them from the love of God which is great encouragement. This would fall into the characteristic of justified. God has to make them holy and blameless. As a result, they were not chosen because they were good, but rather out of love. The Father knew that they would fall into sin and he would still show them grace is showing that the Father's view of them is not based on their performance.

Ephesians 1:4b-6 "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us *in the Beloved*" (NASB, emphasis added). Frame (2013) described this section as dealing with election to adoption:

Election in Christ leads not only to our holiness and blamelessness, but even to our adoption as God's sons and daughters. To be a son of God is not only to be like him, to image him, but also to have a position of privilege, entitling us to an inheritance. (p. 915)

This falls into the characteristic of adoption with the results of having privilege as a result. There are big truths to point out here for the Ephesians and for Christians today. Those that are in Christ are, first of all, adopted. But, this adoption is not by man alone,

but can only be done through Christ. And the following statement of “according to His will” pairs with that statement to tell the Ephesians that they did not earn their adoption as was typical in the time because the adopted son became an heir (Douglas & Tenney, 2011). Also, being adopted into God’s family meant that they left their previous inheritance and will now inherit from God just like a natural born son. This puts them in a place of privilege. As a result, this election is only by His grace and for the praise of His grace.

Ephesians 1:7-10 “*In Him* we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed *in Him* with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in the heavens and things on the earth” (NASB, emphasis added). In the Greek, this is one sentence that begins with a form of *in Christ* showing the emphasis that Paul was placing on the identity. Yet again, Paul showed that only through being *in Christ* can a person be redeemed through the grace of God. This redemption comes only from the relationship that is between the Father and Christ. The identity of “*in Christ*” is based on this relationship between God and Christ which will never change as opposed to an identity that is based between two fallen people. When Christians are seen as *in Christ*, God sees them as He would see Christ. The relationship between the Father and Christ is a perfect relationship between two perfect persons of God that are never changing. Christians, upon salvation, are grafted into this relationship and they can find their identity in the perfect, unchanging relationship of the Father and Son as opposed to an identity based on constantly changing

factors like other fallen people or situations. God also revealed that His purpose is to unite all things in Christ through the cross. If this is God's intention and purpose with this redemption, this purpose should fuel the identity of those in Christ as well.

Ephesians 1:11-14 "*In Him* also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. *In Him*, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed *in Him* with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (NASB, emphasis added). *In Him* opens up both of the sentences that are in this passage showing Paul's further emphasis of the identity that they need to have in Christ. This is a reiteration of the prior discussion on God's election for His purposes. As a result, those in Christ have the purpose in life to follow God's purposes.

Ephesians 1:17-20 "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about *in Christ*, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places" (NASB, emphasis added). Paul followed these prayers for the Ephesians with the

confidence of the promises and the privileges of being in Christ when Christ is ruling over all.

In Ephesians 2:1-4, Paul broke down the previous identity of those who are now in Christ by bringing them the truth of how they were viewed in light of sin and how that they have no reason to boast because they were in the same place as those “sons of disobedience” around them. As a result, when Paul writes Ephesians 2:5-6 “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together [*in*] *Christ* (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*” (NASB, emphasis added). This passage implies that the previous, old self was put to death and now the new life was raised in Christ. This is the characteristic of the identity in Christ that relates to being a new creation as well as with salvation. This sets up the next passage of Ephesians 2:8-10 that tells the Ephesians that while they were these sinful people, God, and God alone, was the one that gave them the faith. As a result, this shows why no one should boast because it is not based on their own works. The identity in Christ is not based on the works of the person, but is based on the works of Christ. This is unlike the cultural identity in which individuals are judged and find their identity in their works. The result is a person that is created in Christ for good works. This is where Paul took the Ephesians in later chapters.

Ephesians 2:11-13 “Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now *in Christ Jesus* you

who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (NASB, emphasis added). Paul touched on the previous identities that these Gentiles once knew in order to show the difference that is this past identity and their identity now in Christ. Paul says that these identities have no hope without God and are strangers to God which is a major difference in identities. Their new identity is contrasted in verse 13 with their old identities in verses 11 and 12 by the use of the words “but now.” The relationship that is stressed here when dealing with identity is not with those other people, but rather with God. Paul called them separate from Christ and strangers of God under their old identity. But, as a result of their new identity, they were brought near to God in Christ.

In Ephesians 2:14-18, Paul described the separation of the Jews and the Gentiles and how being in Christ can break down any barrier that may come up between those in Christ. This is the characteristic of unity in the Body of Christ. This is not done by man, but the reconciliation was done “through the cross.” The reason why they could have fellowship was because of the same Spirit that they both had in them. This is brought up in Philippians 2:1-5. Then, Paul in Ephesians 2:19 says “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household” (NASB). Paul told the people they are no longer the strangers and aliens to God and to the church, but are now fellow citizens and a part of God’s family. This identity in Christ is still found in the relationship between the Christ and God.

Ephesians 3:11-13 is following up with reiterating his salvation that was probably told while he was there the first time. Also, Paul covered the revealing of God’s will to save the Gentiles. Then, Paul reiterated once more that Christ has the eternal purpose carried out through Him, but Paul this time focused on some of the privileges of having

the identity in Christ. They are boldness and confident access to Him which can only be obtained in Christ. Boldness is only found through the Spirit of God that empowers those that are abiding in Christ (John 14-15). Then, Paul covered the confident access to the Father. Christians are in Christ and are adopted into the family and there is a repaired relationship based on faith in the work of Christ. Paul then in Ephesians 3:16 said to the Ephesians that he will be praying that the Spirit will empower them. This is one of the privileges that is granted to those that are in Christ.

Paul ended the wealth of the Christian section with a hard ending which marks the changing of a subject. This is what Paul did because Ephesians 4-6:9 discussed the correct Christian walk. This is best to pair with the identity because the identity should not end with just knowing what the identity is. It will cause those in Christ to act and obey God and to love others.

### **Results of This Solid Foundation**

There are many results that occur as a result of this identity, in Christ. Aside from the characteristics already covered, there are those that the culture-promoted identities cannot fulfill. First, and most important, is that this is a solid foundation and this identity is not about the individual (Geiger, 2008). Geiger made it clear that understanding their identity is not about telling people they are awesome. The end result of an identity in Christ is that God will be glorified. Second, the identity in Christ will result in the person understanding that God wants more than just doing good things or being accepted, God wants them to come to Him (Tchividjian, 2012). Third, those that find their identity in Christ do not go out looking for places to long for because all needs that they long for are found in Christ. Fourth, God renews the self-image that was marred in the Fall by

implementing this union with Christ (Hoekema, 1994). Fifth, this identity is not an end but leads from a self-centered view to serving God and loving others. Sixth, the ultimate desire to belong is fulfilled when God calls Christians His children (1 John 1:3; Vukich & Vandegriff, 2009). Also, the more that Christians understand their position before God, the more they will find the heavenly blessings of Christ throughout their life in order to praise God for (Towns, 2006). Lastly, the final result of this understanding of the identity in Christ that is so often neglected is peace and confidence in the one who has declared them to be justified, sons, and privileged. This identity will stand up against the storms because it is built on a never changing Gospel and the never changing God who will unconditionally love His children and treat them as such.

### **Ministry Application**

#### **General Ministry**

The Gospel is the most important direction that a ministry takes to reach people that are influenced by a culture which creates an unhealthy identity in them. The only solid and healthy foundation is found in Christ and only those that have a new heart and have repented from their sins can have an identity in Christ. This identity fulfills the observations of Erikson and Marcia on a healthy identity while culture creates an unhealthy identity in people. The identity in Christ is the position that results after salvation and people need to remind themselves of this identity that they forget. As a result, the only way to lead those to the healthiest identity is to preach to them the truth about the one in which the identity is found. The best way is to offer discipleship or mentorship to individuals because most people learn from the relationships they have and because God has commanded to go and make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20; Dunn, 2001).

Aside from preaching the Gospel to those that are unsaved, in order to instill this identity in individuals Christians must reveal to them the truth that has already occurred and is already occurring in their life, the truth of being in union with Christ. Also, it is important to teach the truth of what God says about people and combat what media says about them in order to replace the distorted thoughts with truth (Stephens, 1996). For example, when media says someone has to be beautiful in order to have worth, it needs to be combated with God saying He cares about who they are and not what they look like (Mueller, 2007). In order to help build the positive identity in individuals, it is important to point out how they are unique and what that means in light of having a loving Creator. This is done through encouraging their discovery of their identity by walking through it with them, and reiterating the spiritual identity that they have in Christ (Stuart, 2008). To combat the world of materialism that is surrounding the society today, a person must teach people how to redefine success and show that money and possessions do not equal success in the mind of God. One way to do this would be to live out a lifestyle that is not materialistically driven and one of humility (Mueller, 2007). Mueller said that one of the most important lessons to teach is that God owns everything that they have and everything that they are. This also needs to be paired with the reminder of their identity in Christ which calls them to not be consumed by money and to be humble so that God will be glorified with who they are and how they serve Him and love others. Also, there are ways to work with adolescents that are struggling with the initial identity formation stage in their lives.



**Ministry to Adolescents**

**Creating a truth-filled environment.** For adolescents, one of the ways that would help protect their mind from the claims that come from culture about who they are would be to home school them or put them in a Christian environment. Home schooling would be most optimal because of the control a parent can have on what adolescents are learning and can also help teach them how to discern what is true about them. In order to promote growth in the identity of people apart from teaching them the truth, it is important to create a positive learning environment for who they are in Christ. The way to do this would be to assist them in building supportive friend group, create experiences where they can live out their faith, provide them with meaningful adult interaction, provide opportunities to have them make a contribution, and lastly to communicate moral boundaries and create behavioral expectations for them to live by as shown in Scripture (Dunn, 2001).

**Helping adolescents through moratorium.** Another way to build a positive identity in Christ is to help teens through their stage of moratorium. The best way to handle the situation of adolescents struggling with their identity is to understand that it is a process to work through the identity of adolescents that will require answering questions of doubt and also require periods of encouragement paired with the constant reminder of who they are in Christ or preaching the Gospel (Powell & Miller, 2008).

**Being a role model.** Another way is to ask them where they are finding their identity, what is so important that they cannot live without it, or look through the lens of culture to see what is being taught to adolescents (Mueller, 2009). Following these observations, it is important to point out the lies that culture is telling them and back it up

with Scripture and who God says they are, but this needs to be lived out through the one helping out the adolescents because the adolescents will learn where their model gets his or her identity from and see if the same identity holds true to them. Also, it is important to build relationships with adolescents and be an ambassador of Christ as a reflection of the Heavenly Father in order to show the adolescents what it means to have a relationship with Christ and to live as if they are living in Christ (Stephens, 1996). But, in the end, an identity apart from the one based in Christ, one based in culture, will be unhealthy when dealing with the troubling situations that life brings.

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