

A House Built upon the Rock: Finding Our Identity in Christ



by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

One of my favorite Puritan prayers from *The Valley of Vision* reads,

Help me to honor thee by believing before I feel,

For great is the sin if I make feeling a cause of faith.¹

It can be quite tempting to define faith as a feeling, and even more tempting to define our identity with feelings. Feelings are palpable; they pulse within us each day, pumping blood through our life's arteries. They seem as reassuring as our own heartbeat, and that is where the danger lies.

Feelings are part of the blessing we enjoy as God's creatures, and they can serve healthy purposes. When I see my ten-month-old son with an ear-to-ear grin, I feel happiness, fulfillment, and joy. But feelings can also be dangerous when they become the basis for how we live or when we let them define who we are. Feelings are not foundational; we don't stand upon them. Rather, they are complementary to the solid truths of God's Word, and for good reason.

We all know how fickle feelings can be. One day we feel confident of ourselves—our abilities, our identity, our purpose. Like hawks, we seem to soar on the thermals of our good experiences. We feel light, carried by something much stronger than ourselves. The next day, the thermals have died out, hardships have weighed down our wings, and it seems an irritation just to get through the day.

Of course, there are other feelings that last much longer than a moment.

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¹ "The Divine Will" in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, ed. Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 14.

Some feelings follow us around for days or months or even years. They have taken up residence in our daily routine. We may not even be able to remember a time when they weren't there. They have been with us for so long that they seem to define *who we are*. We do not even label them as feelings. We call them "tendencies, habits, qualities, or part of my personality." And if we are not careful, we may let them govern our identity.

Our essence—who we are as creatures made in God's image—precedes our existence—the choices we make and the feelings we have.

Consider feelings of anxiety. Have you ever heard someone say, "She's just a nervous person; that's just who she is"? How can we reconcile this with Jesus' words of comfort in the gospel of Matthew? "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt 6:34). Or Paul's words in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God"? God's Word seems to suggest that anxiety is *not* part of who we are. However much it might characterize us, it does not define or identify us.

God is Lord of our identity. He calls us to stand upon the rock of Christ when proclaiming who we are. So in all our uniqueness and particularities, we are either found in the Son of God or lost outside of him. We are either free in his grace or bound to the experiences and feelings of a fallen world. I hope what follows will encourage you to see your liberating identity in Christ amidst a culture where feelings and experiences shackle identity.

Essence Precedes Existence

I work with graduate students to help them improve their writing. Recently, one of these students introduced a keen insight that captured the heart of the identity issue. The idea came from a story he read about a British pastor, Vaughan Roberts. Roberts has openly discussed his life-long struggle with same-sex attraction. He has always stood firm on the truth that our essence—who we are as creatures made in God's image—precedes our existence—the choices we make and the feelings we have.² The student wrote that one of the greatest threats to our human liberty is the assumption

² See Julian Hardyman, "A Battle I Face." *Evangelicals Now*, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.e-n.org.uk/6028-A-battle-I-face.htm>. This is an interview with Vaughan Roberts, rector of St. Ebbes Church, Oxford about same-sex attraction. The interviewer, Julian Hardyman, is the senior pastor of Eden Baptist Church in Cambridge, England.

that *existence* precedes essence.³ Quite the abstraction, I know. But unpacking it is worth the effort.

The lie espoused by contemporary culture is that our existence—the things we do, the experiences we have, the ensuing thoughts and feelings—defines who we are, our essence. In the case of Vaughan Roberts, this philosophy would suggest that because he experiences same-sex attraction, he *is* a homosexual. His experiences, thoughts, and feelings are seen as definitive. They all point to this identifying descriptor that indicates his essence.

In contrast to this, the biblical view asserts that *essence* precedes existence. Who we *are* determines what we do, think, and feel. This position is admirably upheld by Roberts himself. In an interview, he boldly asserts,

Our identity as Christians flows from our relationship with Christ. All of us are sinners, and sexual sinners. But, if we have turned to Christ, we are new creations, redeemed from slavery to sin through our union with Christ in his death and raised with him by the Spirit to a new life of holiness, while we wait for a glorious future in his presence when he returns. These awesome realities define me and direct me to the kind of life I should live.⁴

Roberts' words bring home that there are only two *essential* identities for humans: *in Christ* or *out of Christ*. This, of course, is laughable to the world around us. "Only two identities for 7.2 billion people? You must be joking." Popular 21st century beliefs have "outgrown" such thinking. So people today might say something like, "We are unique individuals, and we should be freed from the bars of religion that would cage us. We are [essence] who we are [existence]; that is, we are whoever we want to be. There is no end to the possibilities in terms of our growing and evolving identity."

Despite the liberating appeal of such a view, it is, according to Scripture, the exact opposite of liberation. It is, simply put, a crippling lie. In the Bible, we are clearly taught that our essence precedes our existence. Who you are defines what you do.

Consider the creation story. God made us in his image, and as our Creator, he defined our essence. We are *creatures* in covenantal relationship with him. But in Adam, we rebelled against him, believing the lie that what we do makes us who we are. If Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (an act of their existence), then they would *be* like God (essence). After committing the act, they were painfully reminded of their essence as *crea-*

³ My thanks to Will Ross for bringing this to my attention.

⁴ op cit., Hardyman.

tures in relationship with God. All they could do was hope in the promise that Adam's descendent would crush the head of the serpent who had so cunningly led them astray.

So, Adam and Eve were *creatures in relationship with God*. That was their essence, their identity. Before Adam knew the scent of his favorite flower, he was a creature created by God and living in relationship with him. His identity was established and sustained by the Lord of all things. It was upon their identity as creatures in covenantal relationship with God that Adam and Eve should have built their unique existence.

People mistakenly assume that covenantal identity places restrictions on individuality, when the opposite is true.

Since then, every generation has rebelled against this fixed covenantal identity. We have instead believed the lie that our identity is established by our experiences, that we can change who God made us to be. In so doing, we have been taken prisoner by circumstances and the ever-changing currents of our own desires and thoughts. What is worse, we are not only in bondage to unpredictable events and fleeting feelings, but with no baseline identity there is nothing constant, nothing steadfast in life. Instead of being free as we try to “find ourselves,” we are adrift. This is not a picture of liberty but of being lost, alone, and without a course to follow.

People mistakenly assume that covenantal identity places restrictions on individuality, when the opposite is true. Your uniqueness is not stripped from you; rather your covenant identity enables you to build upon something sure, eternal, and solid. Your identity is either built on Christ—the rock—or else it is built on shifting sand (Matt 7:24–27). And though the foundation for all who are in Christ is the same, the house above can have infinite variety.

One book that is part of my son's nightly ritual is *On the Night You Were Born*.⁵ In the dark of his room, as I utter the simple lines, I am always struck by one of them. “There had never been anyone like you ever in the world.” It seems sentimental, but it isn't. It is as much an encouragement to me as (I hope) it will be to him one day. God created no one like him; he is utterly unique, with his own quirks, dreams, thoughts, and passions—and nothing, not even death itself, can take that from him.

Before the fall, Adam's identity was founded upon his relationship with God.

⁵ Nancy Tillman, *On the Night You Were Born* (New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2010).

Because sin marred that identity, God sent his own Son to restore us to who we are truly meant to be. Christ is now the immovable foundation of our identity. So, as I read my son his book, I know that if he is to grow and develop truly, then he must rest upon his relationship with God in Christ. On that rock he can build the house of his identity, and it will stand.

Within our foundational and covenantal identity, we are free to grow and develop our particular gifts, reflecting the infinite creativity of our God. Yet, we must never forget: not only are we built upon God's Word, but we are also being conformed to the image of that Word (Rom 8:29). In that image—the suffering servant, the humble king, the selfless lover of God—is where we find our greatest freedom and identity. We are identified and free—not by rejecting God—but by embracing him.

True Freedom

The freedom that we have in Christ, then, is what empowers us to grow and develop confidently in our uniqueness. This adds new depth to our understanding of Galatians 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” What is this *freedom* Paul speaks of?

In the context of the letter, Paul was addressing the tendency of his listeners to seek their identity in the wrong place. Though they were Christians, they still relied on the Jewish law. They sought to define their covenantal identity by works—in what they did or did not do (existence). They had forgotten that their lasting identity (essence) was already established by God. What they did (existence) was meant to complement and build upon who they were (essence), not the other way around. Paul's hearers were children of God, children of the promise, and therefore free to live in a way that *confirmed* this, not in a way that established it. What they did each day may have reflected their soul's disposition in a given moment, but it did not define who they were (and are). Only Christ has that benefit and authority.

The freedom Paul speaks of in Galatians is not just freedom from judgment by the law; it is freedom from finding identity *in* the law. Their identity was found in grace, not in works, for even the giving of the law in the Old Testament was an act of grace.⁶

Certainly, the law set apart the Jews, making them unique and holy as God's

⁶ “The call and covenanting of Abraham was an act of grace. The descendants of Abraham were promised the kingdom by grace. The mighty acts of God in Egypt were performed because of the promise to Abraham (Ex 2:23–25). The Exodus event becomes a model of salvation by grace, its goal being the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham in the Promised Land. It is utterly inconceivable that God should break off his program of salvation by grace in mid-stream (between Egypt and Canaan) and, despite his promises to Abraham, saddle his people with a frustrating program of salvation by works! . . . The only reasonable assessment of the Sinai law in this context is that it is part of the program of grace whereby God works to fulfill his promises to Abraham.” Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2000), 74.

people. But we cannot confuse uniqueness with identity. Their existence, their practicing of the law, was meant to *complement* and *confirm* the covenant loyalty within their hearts, not establish it for the recognition of others. This is an important truth for which Christ gave his life: we are identified only in God's grace, in our union with Christ, not in our actions and feelings. Christ, as the climax of God's grace, is the rock upon which we build our individuality. We can sigh in relief that our identity is not subject to our actions, our thoughts, or our feelings (which change like the wind); our identity is incontestably rooted in an eternal *person*, who gives us the freedom to grow in right relationship with God.

Maintaining the supreme importance of that relationship, Vaughn Roberts has boldly identified himself with Christ, instead of with his experience. We admire Roberts for this, because we know that this is not an easy road to walk. Each of us, in one way or another, struggles to realize or remember that our identity is in Christ—and then struggles to live out of that identity.

So let's take this moment to remind ourselves of who we truly are, in both our good experiences and our bad, when we feel assaulted and when we feel inspired. Do you struggle with same-sex attraction? You are a man or woman in Christ. Do you constantly think about when you can have your next drink? You are a man or woman in Christ. Do you freeze up with anxiety when you are asked to do something outside of your routine or when things do not go as planned? Take a breath. You are a man or woman in Christ. Do you struggle to make it through the day because you feel emotionally numb? You too are a man or woman in Christ.

Likewise, our good experiences do not determine our identity. Are you full of love for your spouse and find in him or her the wealth of God's grace? Are you thrilled to be pursuing God's call in your life? Are others treating you as a model for godly parenting? You still are a man or woman in Christ.

Every one of us who has placed our hope, trust, and love in Jesus alone *is* in Christ. No feeling or circumstance can ever change that. Upon Christ as our rock, we build our house, and amidst the swells and tides of a lifetime of feelings and experiences, it will stand.

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