

## The battle for identity

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I believe that the core temptation and subsequent damage done to man through the deception and work of the devil is the destruction of his identity.

For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God...* (Gen 3:5)

Satan deceived Adam into exchanging his identity as a son of God for an alternative identity: to be like God. So what is it that God had that Adam did not have?

Well, before we get there let's first look at what Adam already had. Adam as a son of God was relationally bound into family. He was a son and also a steward of God's property. He lived off inheritance and had responsibilities to oversee the earth. He was given a mandate to fulfill and in doing so bring glory to his Father. Now, what did Adam not have which tempted him into *being like God*? Adam was not afforded to be the creator of his own destiny. Neither did he have control over his life, purpose and dreams. Also there was certain knowledge hidden from him, which he felt could lead to the unlocking of God's secret to power and authority. I would like to highlight 3 key issues here: *Control, destiny and knowledge*. Adam desired to gain control of his own world. Through this control he would be able to 'imagine his own world', 'map his own path' and then 'do things his own way'. In other words Adam could become the master of his own destiny. Yet, for him to achieve this he required information of the unknown and thus the quest for knowledge began. Knowledge would give him the power to gain control and pursue his own destiny.

Thus Adam desired to be 'upgraded' from a son in God's family, to become the creator of his own destiny. In this Adam followed in Satan's footsteps and thus became bound by the same sin and realm of darkness reserved for the devil. He ended as a son of evil and a slave to sin. Man's identity, male and female created in God's image, was thus destroyed and Satan's goal to distort the image of God in the universe was achieved. The fatal blow to Adam was that his identity, rooted in the image of God, was altered forever. He ended as a slave. Yet, to this day Satan still deceives man through the illusion of freedom offered through control, destiny and knowledge.

Jesus was sent as the second Adam to restore the image of God in the universe. As the image of God was given to mankind, Jesus had to become a man in order to reclaim it. Sin was the obvious stronghold holding man captive and thus Jesus destroyed its power and paid the ransom in full with His own life and blood. Yet, the ultimate liberty purchased by Christ was not only the forgiveness and

redemption from sin, but the restoration of man's identity and place in the family of God.

Whereas forgiveness and the redemption from sin is a free gift of grace received through faith in Christ, the inner journey of discovering and choosing to be a 'son in the house' instead of a self-centered pursuer of vain imaginations can take a lifetime.

### **Who am I?**

I truly believe that to the extent that an individual is able to answer this question in his inner being he is able to overcome in this world and therefore help others along this journey. This is a very personal journey that each and every individual has to make on their own. This does not however mean that they should be alone. On this journey we can and should help one another, yet each and every individual son and daughter of God has to reach Father's house in their own personal capacity and way.

I was first confronted with the question of 'dying to self' in 1989. Through a very personal and difficult journey (it always is) I discovered that 'surrendering to God' opened the path of 'dying to my own way', in order for me to then follow Him along His way. This particular journey has shaped and transformed my life for the past 20 years.

At first I experienced 'dying to self' as a battle for life. It involved the exchanging of my will for His will, with the result that I experienced my life 'slipping away' and His 'life becoming increasingly prominent'. This can be a terrifying experience since one loses what is closest to you – your self-will. Although I increasingly became convinced that all of this was a work of the Lord, I did not at first understand His reasoning. Due to the experience of an increase in His life (light, holiness, love), I gathered that His reasoning was to restore His life in me. This is of course true, but the foundational understanding for this process I have only come to realize during the last couple of years.

Father is fundamentally restoring us as sons and daughters in His family. At the core of this restoration is our identity. This restoration involves the following aspects:

We cannot effectively live the Christian life outside a relationship with God. Both Jesus and Adam had a conversational relationship with Father which involved their daily activities, choices and journey.

- This relationship is defined both in a family and a kingdom context. God is our Father and Jesus our Friend and Brother. The church is a community of family members – brothers and sisters in the household of God. Yet, God is also Creator, Judge and Ruler, whereas Jesus is both Saviour, Lord and King. This places us also in a kingdom context of laws, authority, power and influence.

- Our restored identity may only be defined by our Father – not ourselves. He chooses to call us 'His sons and daughters'. Today He calls us to 'see' ourselves in the same terms.

To follow the abovementioned to its full conclusion I have come to the following understanding:

Following (my-)self instead of the Spirit leads to a breakdown of my conversational relationship with God and a decrease in His life in a similar way it did with Adam. And thus whenever I experience a strain in my conversational relationship with God, I check whether I have been following my own way instead of the path of the Lord (following the Spirit).

Following (my-)self leaves me isolated. Although it affords me ultimate personal control, it also leads to loneliness, depression and competitiveness. Humility and the acknowledgment and honouring of my wife, children, brothers and sisters leads to interdependence and the decrease of personal control. Contrary to self's logic this leads to healing, joy and peace. Why? Because we were designed by God to be like Him – living in community.

Any attempt at giving one an alternative identity other than that of a son of our Father must be resisted. Denominations give people alternative identities through their names, and the titles, robes and positions they have on offer. Certain events in life such as success or failure, personal sin, financial status, upbringing or racial and culture heritage also attempts to shapes our identity. All of these 'shapers of identity' have to be rejected and laid aside in order to come to the fullness that Father has destined us to be.

This is not an issue of 'good versus evil' or 'right and wrong'. It is therefore also not an issue of law or works. Instead, restoration of my identity is completely rooted in grace! To us who 'see', the grace has been granted to live in a fuller dimension of liberty, life and relationship. Others who do not yet see and embrace this identity in Christ will by necessity grasp at different things to 'make sense of themselves' in their endeavor to find their 'lost' identity.

### **Love is the key**

I am convinced that only God's love can effectively liberate and empower a person to press through on the journey of exchanging a self-pursuing-life for a life lived in the containment of the Lord's path, will and life.

The choice of the narrow path, which is difficult, is the choice of exchanging my life in His love. When I am confronted with the choice between life and death, wisdom will dictate that I hopefully choose life. Yet, when I am confronted with the choice of loving Him versus loving what I already love (without death or destruction being an obvious consequence), I will only choose His way if I personally love Him above what I already love. This is a hard choice, yet one that can be overcome when we experience His love. This is also a journey of faith in

allowing the Lord to heal our pain, disappointments and brokenness through His love. We sometimes hold on to these wounds as reasons (weapons) to justify our behaviour. All these need to be surrendered to the Lord and exchanged for His love in order to be made whole.

Being taught 'who we are in Christ', is not sufficient in my opinion. Most of these teachings are presented and applied as knowledge to sugar-coat self and are used as keys to unlock blessings and prosperity (exactly what Adam did). No, unless we understand and embrace Father's restoration as a relational reunion, which is fully based in love and experienced on a heart level (self), all our knowledge regarding 'who we are in Christ' are mostly mere additives to probably already toxic potion of self-indulgence.

To this purpose I believe that we must faithfully pray for the revelation of Father's love for our families, friends and communities. Jesus came to demonstrate this love and purchased our liberty along the way. We as His followers are also to continue along this path as witnesses to a broken world.

Through our love for God and one another, we are both the testimony and hope for a dying and lost world. We are also to serve as a compass to the church at large who are mostly still running themselves to exhaustion along the never-ending path in pursuit of self's significance and identity (in His Name!).