

Have you noticed that the idea of “identity” is in very active vogue in America since at least the beginning of this century? And “identity” is now being emphasized and deeply embedded in powerful places...from Washington power centers to large corporations and, yes, “identity-forming” colleges and universities. The momentum is so great that *feelings of identity* are now given huge attention and weight. The result is that what’s called *identity politics* has now been codified in many places as *identity policies or practices*.

Now, here’s a brief list of typical identity classifications: race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social background, and social class—and that’s not to mention religion! Often, people combine a rather fluid mix of several of these classifications to bring awareness and advocacy to their highly customized identity.

But stop for a moment to ponder the critical question for *believers*: how does connection to and faith in God have us address the issue of identity for us in our workplaces and neighborhoods? Well, on that topic, the story of Abraham is very instructive. Let’s poke around on that, starting with this four-word identifier...

Abraham was a Gentile! Did that sentence surprise you? Well, you aren’t alone if that sentence surprised you, many people would flat out say it is wrong! Here it is again: *Abraham was a Gentile!* So, here’s the thing. Many folks seem to stridently hold the opinion that Abraham was a Jew. Trouble with that is, calling anyone a “Jew” didn’t emerge until several generations after Abraham. Many experts believe that label is grounded in a shortening of the name of “Judah,” one of the twelve tribes of Israel and the name of the Southern Kingdom sacked by its enemies. And, of course, Judah the man was Abraham’s great-grandson. So, Abraham was not a Jew—rather, he was an ancestor of the Jews!

Still other folks mistakenly think that Abraham was part of Israel. Trouble with that is, Jacob was the man who became Israel—and Jacob was Abraham’s grandson...as well as Judah’s father. So, Abraham was not part of Israel, he was an ancestor of Israel!

By the way, do you recall what the name “Israel” means? Jacob was struggling with God, and that gave rise to a new name! Genesis 32:28 (ESV) says, “Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Abraham was *not* the man struggling with God—his grandson Jacob who became Israel was! And even to this day, modern-day Israel struggles with God as to His revelation of His Son Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Well now, it’s hardly a surprise that a great-grandfather like Abraham would not have his personal identity in his great-grandchildren or even his grandchildren. But many Jews in the time of Jesus *did have identity in Abraham*, their ancestor. Here’s a revealing passage from Matthew’s gospel (3:7-9) that reveals the ever-present reality of sinful people pursuing identity in illustrious or honored ancestors—you know, like the Jewish Pharisees identifying with Abraham...

“But when [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.’” *So, claimed identity didn’t impress John!*

But striving to *worthy benchmarks* like Abraham is certainly appropriate...*when that is working to bring us to higher levels*. The Apostle Paul appealed to that when coming to Antioch and being invited to speak.

“After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.’ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: ‘Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. ... Before his coming, John [the Baptist] had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’ Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.’” (Acts 13:15-16,24-26)

Here, Paul appeals to the identity of Jewish attendees in the synagogue not for them to gain personal advantage over others *but to bring them to repentance and to a new identity—yes, an identity in Christ!* Some responded to that, then they extended the reach of the gospel well beyond Antioch with missions.

But many Jews did not respond to that appeal, then or now! But interest in these Jews originating in the Middle East rose more to the forefront with the persecutions of Jews in Russia and in Europe in the 1800s and 1900s—especially exploding in a public-awareness sense with Germany’s annihilation of six million Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. Following that was the political establishment of modern-day Israel in 1948.

With those developments and ensuing wars between Israel and its Middle East neighbors, many Christians revved up associating Abraham’s identity with Jews and Israel. Haven’t you heard people vehemently insist that Abraham was Jewish? These folks assigned identity to Abraham that is not truly accurate, even if the Jews of Jesus’s time and now correctly identify him as their ancestor!

Let’s back up in time now, all the way to Abraham himself. Apparently, Abraham’s identity was not particularly strong in his father, Terah...just brief mentions of him are given in the Bible. No, Abraham was set apart for God...he left his kin...he left his home in the Chaldees in obedience to God! Yes, in reading his story in Genesis and the New Testament, Abraham’s identity was obviously in—*surprise*—God Himself!

Yes, Abraham was set apart by God, for God and His purposes—He was to be father of the nations, *both Jew and Gentile!* He was among the few Old Testament figures called out in Hebrews 11 so-called Hall of Faith. Reading the accounts of Abraham’s life in Genesis is, frankly, breathtaking—his listening to God...his obedience...his patience...his faith...his responses...*yes, in sum, his identity in God!*

And in the New Covenant, God calls believers to have their identity in Christ! Born-again believers are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are no longer to be slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness! (Romans 6:15-18) And Paul wrote this to the Ephesians (4:22-24): “...put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” *That’s God’s intended identity for us...all-encompassing, promise-laden identity in Christ!*

Galatians 3:7-9 reveals Paul writing and teaching again. “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” *Yes indeed, Abraham’s identity was in God! His identity was not as a Jew or as a Gentile—his biography in the Bible reveals a man who was entirely God’s!*

And so, it’s clear that we of faith in Christ are “sons of Abraham,” as Paul said! But even so, our identity is *not* in Abraham...or David or Mary or Paul or Peter—the identity of believers is to be identity in Christ!

But, sadly, American Christianity’s currently quite loud and often self-satisfied and varied versions offer a wild kaleidoscope that is borderline comedic and tragic at the same time! Identities are often in race and heritage...denominations and theological systems...virtue issues like pro-life and LGBTQ...religious beliefs and culture wars...political parties and leaders—yes, check in soon for yet another identity! This is why, centuries ago, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I know nothing except Christ and Him crucified.”

Oh, yes, I can hear some saying something like this right now: *you are so clueless—my priorities are godly priorities!* OK. But what is the *primary, overriding identity* those in your daily life at home and at work know you have—specifically the major identity *you most readily share and emphasize*. Your country? Your politics? Your race? Your work? But wait—first and foremost—*isn’t it to be Christ and Him crucified?*

Imagine your city, your country being chock full of Christians of whom pretty much everyone says, “Yep, they’re sold out to Christ above all.” But lay the Christian crowd aside for a moment. Does the hill you’re willing to die on have little to do with the hill Jesus died on? *Our great privilege is...identity in Christ!* Yeah.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Over the centuries, by word and by practice, many of those who have claimed Christianity—including Roman Catholics and several of the Reformers—instituted dominating political structures and practices inextricably embedded in their practice of Christianity. Does this align well or badly with the Apostle Paul who said, “I know nothing except Christ and Him crucified?”
2. Who or what would those closest to you personally, like your spouse or family, say your identity is in? Who or what would those you work with daily say that your identity is in? Is there a contrast between the two opinions? Discuss.
3. Consider this scenario. You are close to a self-professed Christian whose zeal and advocacy for a political or cultural issue—whether conservative or liberal—seems to substantially overwhelm their identity in and their advocacy for Christ and Him crucified. In fact, those who you two share acquaintance with several people who have come to believe that this person’s advocacy is what Christianity is all about, thereby diminishing your and others’ witness for Christ and Him crucified.

What do you do with this real-world scenario? Would you handle this as simply their “calling” and that your friend should be left alone to their advocacy? Or do you talk to your friend about the issue? Do you talk to these mutual acquaintances and try to explain the differences to them? Or do you leave it all alone? Discuss.