

Identity, Community, Belonging

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As humans we all have an identity. Awareness of how we see ourselves and how others see us is fundamental to our character. At the highest level, it is our *name* and our *story* that identify us as unique people. There is a deeper definition of identity: “(a) sameness of essential or generic character in different instances; (b) sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing.”¹

As humans, we tend to identify by certain patterns. We classify ourselves by *patterns of sameness*. We all have associations and allegiances we make in our heart – things we identify *AS* or *BY* – and these associate us with groups who share those traits. Leveraging myself as an example, when I say, “I am Christian,” I am grouped in with all Christians. But then *Christadelphian* is a smaller subset. And then *Christadelphian engineer* is a yet smaller subset. In essence, I am defining how I uniquely identify by associations with patterns or groups of people that you have experience with and can understand.

Within these identity groups (faith groups for example), we come to form communities – networks of relationships – which are critical for human well-being. Where we identify is where our action, our investment, our time, our *community* is. This principle is well-summarized in Matthew: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Mat 6:21)*

As a Christian, my deepest community is in the relationships I have within Christadelphia. This is my *community*. I also have other communities in my life. I have engineering groups that I participate in and foster relationships with. I have activity groups of things my family likes to do – overlanding, camping, and biking. In our case, many of these communities are outside of my Christadelphian identity, but we associate around a *shared interest* in activities.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity>

Where we have communities – be it ecclesias, CYC groups, knitting groups, work groups, activity groups – there we have *belonging*. The community we form around our identity groupings engenders belonging. A Cornell University guidance document summarizes the principle this way: “Belonging is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group.”²

Belonging is a deep human need documented in countless psychological and sociological studies and principles. The sociological trifecta of *identity*, *community*, and *belonging* defined by human connection has a profound bearing on our life. These concepts are tightly correlated and interrelated though they also have bearing independently: “Our sense of identity is founded on social interactions that show our belonging to particular communities through shared beliefs, values, or practices.”³

I propose that this sociological reality is highly intentional to the creative genius of our Heavenly Father. It is a tool that protected us when times were less secure, and more agrarian or nomadic than they are now. It is a native tool that helps those of us who *believe* reach those who do *not* believe. It is also the fundamental underpinning of the purpose of the church. It is a valuable reflection to consider our own identities – how and with whom we identify – and how that correlates to our relationship with Christ and the Christadelphian community.

Our Identity

Accepting the premise of divine intent in the psychological interplay between our innate identities, the communities we build within them, and how this can fill our need to belong, it is valuable to reflect on our own identity. A tool for this is to ask yourself how you complete the sentence ‘*I am* _____.’

There is a subconscious pattern I have discovered where I say *I am* something that I identify *with* or *by*, while there are other things *I do*, but do *not* identify as. For example: *I am* a father, *I am* an engineer, *I am* a husband, *I am* a Christian, *I am* a sinner. In contrast: I like to mountain bike, though I do not say *I am* a biker. I like to run, but I do not say *I am* a runner. I like to do outreach, but I do not say *I am* a preacher.

² <https://diversity.cornell.edu/belonging/sense-belonging>

³ <http://www.sirc.org/publik/Belonging.pdf>

I encourage you to take a moment for yourself and reflect on how you complete the sentence ‘*I am _____*.’ Create a list of your instinctual patterns of sameness with other humans with which you identify. These do change over time, of course – for a large portion of my life I was a student. Our relationships with friends and our journey through life will, of course, affect these, but consider who you are and where you are now. Keep these close, because as we consider God’s intent with these identities for ourselves, it will be relevant to assess the relationship of our faith to these identities and the communities we form within them.

Our community

Looking at my journey through the epochs of life, I see that very different patterns have formed in my communities over time. Raised as a third-culture kid with Australian parents living in America, I always had a subtle struggle to fit in. The one place I always felt completely normal was at meeting. I know this is not everyone’s reality, but I always felt the warm and supportive love and acceptance of an extended family in my ecclesia. As such, I had a deep sense of belonging there, and did not need or foster relationships outside of that.

Supporting this was the consistent refrain ‘be in the world but not of the world,’ creating my very insular world view. It meant I had limited involvement in my school community. I did not join any clubs in college, I stayed off campus, and I have no friends or lasting relationships from the six years I spent (yes, six years) getting a Bachelors degree. This is not to say that I did not have a profound sense of community and belonging during that era of my life. I had (and still have) wonderful friend relationships from the time in CYC and my ecclesial community, but I built no community amongst the college students.

In reflection, I now have a transforming sense of the phrase ‘be in the world but not of it.’ Jesus’ timeless prayer for the ages in John 17 brings appropriate clarity to this concept:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:14-17)

Our relationship with the world is *not* one of arm's length! The destination of Christ's message to us in John is *not* being 'not of this world' – that is the beginning! The destination is verse 18: *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:18)*

We *are sent* into the world. We are to live here and build community now. We are not to build in a way that is swayed by the sensual power or consuming energies for fruitless human goals. Romans is powerful to this point:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:2)

In essence, Christ's sanctifying commission of us in our journey of faith, even this many generations after his time, is to invest in *this* life – to go into the world in a way that recognizes we have the capacity to *transcend* the temporal identities and pleasures of this life. We do this by guarding our *hearts* with the transcendent insulation of the transformed mind which protects us from the evil one – our own conceit. Our own conceit results in our being consumed by the temporal, and we thereby become unwilling to sacrifice for the eternal. But we have been given the tools to go into the world with his energy and the insulation of the spirit to protect us.

Paul complements Christ's message to 'go into the world' by telling us how to execute this commission. In his letter to the Corinthians, he encourages us, in essence, to realize the divine genius of the sociological reality of our identity groups and their resulting communities for the purpose of sharing the message of Christ:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (1Cor 9:19-22)

Paul was operating objectively here at the *nexus* of *identity*, *community*, and *belonging*. He is saying that he leveraged his Jewish identity to touch and connect with the Jews and build the community of faith. He used his human capacity to connect and create community around

shared patterns. He is *choosing* to *identify* with a group (for instance, in our case, it could be a work group, a sports group, an ethnic group, a knitting group, a nerd group) and to *leverage* that to create a community and thereby ultimately gain not *just* the *human* value we get *now* from that sense of belonging, but also ultimately to share the transforming value of belonging to Christ.

There have been times in life when I carried a sense of guilt for non-Christian community. I have actively held relationships and natural communities at arm's length, or chosen to avoid them. In contrast, I now understand it is an asset for Christ when we exist in and embrace our communities! The strong message in Jesus' pinnacle prayer for us in John 17 is: "Go! Build communities and relationships, but do what you need to do to guard your hearts from the empty conceit that sees this life as *the only thing*, as the *destination*."

My negative conscience about my engagement with the needs and values of my extra-christadelphian communities is *gone* as I now recognize this is *not* an insular command. It is a prayer of support to engage in *this* family first, but *also* to build community around our passions and interests and leverage our identity for a broad community.

We also cannot ignore the substance of Christ's caveat. He is praying not that we are taken *out* of this world, but that we are *protected* from the 'Evil One'. Personally, I guard my heart from the evil one by having an invested stake in the Christadelphian community, in this intentional support system for feeble sinners. I need you, in order to stay focused. I need the energy and support I get from this community in order to have the strength to be sent into the world without being swayed by its hedonistic energies. Weekly meetings, deep friendships, social gatherings with my local group, engaging articles and ideas and studies – these all provide the strength I need to stay strong in my faith while ministering to my communities outside this community.

We summarize the divine intent of community with respect to our faith by combining Paul's message in Corinthians (with his active and intentional leverage of his community identities) with Jesus' prayer in John. We conclude *our individual communities* are *precious* to Christ! There is clearly a special place for the community we share in faith with the family of God. But our other associations – with our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues, our clubs, or whatever associations we innately possess or those we have chosen to foster – are also precious to Christ.

Christ's identity

Considering how Christ chose to identify himself – and what community he fostered – is helpful in completing the picture of the principles of identity, community, and belonging from a scriptural perspective. Our Lord identifies as a Jew – he associates with his *story* of Jewish lineage. He engaged deeply with that cultural and social identity by participating in it. He leveraged it, built relationships with the synagogue (even at the age of twelve). He was present in all aspects of the social life and cultural festivals of a Jew. Via that social identification, he garnered tremendous insight and credibility to address its dysfunction. He was *not* one crying in the *wilderness*. Instead he was in the synagogue, his voice within Jerusalem, declaring true faith. He was actively touching lives by being in the contemporary world, not insular from it. As he was active in his *community*, he was *very* explicit about his identity for us!

Let's apply the *I am* _____ test to Christ's own words. Look at how Christ uses the *I am* _____ phrase.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

Christ identifies as a shepherd. As such, he is protector and saviour. Reflecting back to John 17, he manifests this identity in his prayer, when he says 'protect them.' There are manifold ways he manifests this identity, but none more powerfully than on the cross in putting himself into harm's way and standing directly between the natural consequence of our sin and its mortality – suffering mortal personal harm for our protection.

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. (John 10:9)

Growing up raising livestock, the gate principle is palpable to me. The gate is the thing that divides. It keeps the flock in and the predators out when needed, but it also releases the flock to pastures for fulfillment. It represents Christ as the protector, but also the coach and director – standing between us and threats, but also encouraging us to be strong in adventuring for him. Similar to the Shepherd identity, it also carries the idea of Leadership.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

The vine is the community anchor. It provides structure and delivers energy to the branches, empowering and supporting them in bearing fruit. Christ is the structural element of support for us, and a channel for energy and sustenance.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. (John 15:1)

This is a beautiful metaphor for the network of relationships between ourselves and the Eternal. The image here is one of sequential reliance – from our reliance on Christ as the vine to Christ’s reliance on the Eternal as the channel of provision.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

Again we see Christ associating with the entity that gives and provides what we desperately need. We see a provider in this, we see a sustainer, but we also see a comforter – an entity rendering direct care for our basic needs, but with an overtone of also caring about our emotional and temporal well-being. Provider, sustainer, comforter.

While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (John 9:5)

Light is the universal symbol of hope, and by hope we can taste peace, and with peace we can feel joy. Christ is the foundation of *hope!* There is also an energy and dynamo to this phrase, with Christ as a motivator and an energizer. It also fits the metaphor of Jesus as the light, and we are the reflection that shines him into the world.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.... (John 11:25)

Christ identifies as our savior.

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Finally, Jesus identifies as our channel to The Eternal!

In all of these, Jesus is building a community. All of his ‘*I am _____*’ statements correlated to his community leadership – coaching, shepherding, protecting, encouraging, and serving... unto death. I am inspired to look at Jesus’ associations as I consider my own; to see his generous giving and supporting roles while feeling his invitation to join his community. It is both inspiring and instructive to consider that he was intentional building the most wonderfully inclusive community! He was preaching this self-same message to publicans, centurions, sinners, and

pharisees alike, and he has invited us to have our sense of belonging beside him in a transforming way.

Our belonging in Christ

The invitation to belong to the community of Christ is warmly open. It has the power to both fill us, emotionally and spiritually, with human companionship and support, and also to provide for us the strength we need to also engage with our temporal communities and to reflect Christ. A final complement to considering our own identities and how Christ self-identified is to ask ourselves how *God* identifies *us*. How does *God* know us? How does God describe *us*? How does the Eternal Power of the Universe see our identity, our unique and individual ‘patterns of sameness’? We are given some insight into that answer in Colossians:

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:27)

There are a handful of different images of the atonement principles given in Scripture. The essence I take is that our *decision* to associate with Christ – to *identify* with Christ and his work and sacrifice – is how we *accept* the creator’s invitation to grace. God *in his eternal grace* identifies us with that ‘pattern of sameness’ of his Son in being redeemed. In associating with Christ – in taking the spirit and principles of Christ into our being – we are seen *as Christ! I am* the living Body of Christ – not just a Christian, but an *actual* manifestation of the *living* body. This is such a powerful and moving metaphor for us to embrace with the depths of our innermost being!

I am a weak, failing, selfish, carnal, impatient, unrighteous conglomeration of cells, *but the Eternal Father of lights* – the eternal creator of the universe who directly and affirmatively identifies itself as self-identifying – *does not see me as such*.

God – the Eternal, Yahweh, whatever descriptor we use – is the one entity in the entire universe for which there is *no sameness of essential character*. There is *nothing* for God to identify by. That is why, when Moses asks the Eternal its name, the Eternal responds *e'heyeh aser' e'heyeh*: ‘I AM WHO I AM!’ That title, that identity, it is a mind-bendingly powerful rational enigma. God’s definition of self carries a sense of necessity, simplicity, and absolute-ness. When I think *What is God?*, I think of descriptions, like eternal, all powerful, omniscient, infinite. Instead, in using this

particular phrasing, God identifies Himself as the self-existent One, the eternal, unique, uncreated God. *God just is.* He is the ultimate truth, the only necessary being.

And, *this only necessary being* does not see me as Luke, the carnal, selfish, father of three, husband of April, dorky Christian Engineer, dying pile of self righteous flesh. The Eternal, *the top of the identity pyramid*, chooses to see me as he sees his own family, *his own child*. In seeing us as Christ – in our participation in *Christ's* life, both historical and present – we can be warmed in our souls, my dear family members, in the *incredible* power of *this* family. We all, as the family of God, share the *sameness of ideas* around the *meaning* of the 'I AM' and his Son, the Messiah, and our physical manifestation of that legacy in a community of faith.

In this ordering of things, *you are* the body of Christ. Not only are you a Christian, but you *are* a good shepherd, you *are* the gate, you *are* the vine the ties us all together. In choosing to identify as Christ, and in building community around that identity, you become active participants in the living family of Christ. In so doing, you fill that basest of human needs of community and belonging.

You are to *me* the light of my world. You are to me the way, the truth, and the life. When my soul is down and I am wracked with anxiousness, loneliness, self-loathing, and uncertainty, *you are* the light, the smile, and the warm embrace that draws me back. When my dad died when I was 18, my compass was gone, my family was lost and broken, adrift in grief and despair. It was *this community* that brought hope. You were our bread of life (or casserole as the case may be) that returned light and hope, that shepherded and loved us through our grief, and that guarded us with belonging.

As we journey through life, our identities grow and morph, and oftentimes our communities do, too. As much as I have just shared how this community has been an anchor and support for me, and I have deeply valued an abiding sense of belonging, I know that many struggle to find that. Living in a community with a lack a sense of belonging is deeply unsettling and lonely. When we are feeling isolated, there is value in being objective about what we are missing, realizing that the human element can still overwhelm the spirit of Christ. But we should still continue to seek for that connection. For those of us who do carry a sense of belonging, it is beholden on us to ensure we are inclusive in acting like Paul to be a 'Jew to the Jew and a Greek to the Greek,' to reach out and build community within community. Actively sharing the gift of

belonging, in connecting with others within an identity group, is truly embracing and living the spirit of Christ in us.

As we journey, we can reflect that every time we say ‘*I am _____*’ we are channeling our ordering in the *family* of ‘I AM’ – the self-defining eternal creator. And we are sharing an identity with Christ because of the unsearchable depth of grace and love of our eternal I AM. The *eternal, loving* creator made known to *you* the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ *in you*, the hope of glory.