

AN ARTICLE BY LINKS PLAYERS COO JEFF HOPPER

PROPER ID REQUIRED

Why it's crucial that we remember who God has made us to be

We are all asked for our identification many places we go these days.

Pay enough for groceries using your credit card, and you'll need to show your ID. Look younger than you really are while ordering a glass of wine, and you'll be getting your card out. Enter the TSA security line on your next flight to a golf wonderland, and only your ID will let you through. It's the way of a wary world.

Yet we would have to agree that these cards say so little about us: name, address, date of birth. There is also a picture, of course—usually a bad one. But that's about where it ends. So important in society, our official IDs are almost worthless in telling one another who we really are.

Not long ago, I was reading an autobiographical book about a woman's journey from one identity to another.¹ She was not a schizophrenic. Rather, she recognized that the life she was living was not the life God would have her live. Committed to a particular set of sins, she could have written about how she had been rehabilitated from each of these until she had come to a new righteousness, even righteousness in Christ. Instead, she chose to express her choices in this one phrase: "my sin of identity."

In this writer's case, she had elected to identify herself by the way she expressed herself sexually. This came with a set of accoutrements, we might say. When you choose a lifestyle—any lifestyle—you choose the places and people and language and actions that come with it.

Golfers do this in a quite observable way. When you choose to identify as a golfer, you find the other golfers at a party and talk about the places you like to play. You buy and wear golf attire, often with the logos of some of those special places. Your conversation includes terms like "swing path" and "lob wedge" and "greens in regulation." Moreover, you make a habit of spending four- and five-hour sessions with people who do the same thing!

Golf is not, in the way that many sexual expressions are, a sin. But it can be. And if it's not a sin, it can be a feeble replacement for an identity that holds firm in all circumstances and environments. In this way, it is like virtually every identity we might take up in this world, luring us to settle for something far less than best. Let's consider how this works.

SINFUL IDENTITIES

Some identities, no matter how confidently we embrace them, simply do not align with a biblical understanding of how God would have us live.

Perhaps the most obvious of these competing identities is declared by those

who worship a God other than YHWH—that is, the ancient God of the Hebrew people, worshipped as the Creator and praised as Father by Jesus of Nazareth. It is fashionable in our time to gloss over significant differences by saying that all religions point to the same God. But YHWH, the God of the Bible (rendered "LORD," with small caps, in many translations), did not permit such a flattening of the religious landscape. Rather, he said through Moses, "You shall have no other gods." Then he went on to define through Moses how he wanted his people to live. You cannot function with another god or another moral code in mind and still worship and live according to the Bible.

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If one identifies, then, as a Muslim, they are not worshipping the same God defined in the Bible. A universalist approach may say that Allah is the same God as YHWH, but neither Muslims nor Jews nor Christians believe this—not if they hold to the long-established understanding of their scriptures. And for the Jew or the Christian who adheres to that opening line of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments)—"you shall have no other gods"—those who identify with another god do so in transgression of God's enduring law, in sin.

For Christians, this same understanding can be painfully extended to Jewish friends who do not receive Jesus as the promised Messiah. Jesus is one with the Father (John 10:30), something he expressed to the Jewish leaders of his time, and something that was confirmed in his resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand. A godhead that includes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is an

affront to Jewish teaching that considers this three gods rather than one; but a godhead where God singularly exists in these three "persons" is for Christians the glory of God's fullness and the accurate identity of who he is. Those who accept the Old and New Testaments in their unified whole find this full picture of God in those Testaments. Any other god is not God of the Bible.

In addition to God himself, we find in the Bible God's designs for living under him. In the Old Testament, this was known as the Law. It was a code of restrictions, directions and permissions that would, when lived out, differentiate God's people from those around them.

While many New Testament theologians agree that not all these laws (or any of them!) are applicable to a people living under the grace of Jesus, nearly all will tell you that there are several threads of God's righteousness that continue in Christ and are to be lived out by his followers. These include (in addition to singularity of worship to the One True God): love, mercy, justice, faithfulness, generosity, honesty, sexual purity, and Spirit-led living. Even Paul, the great defender of grace, spent large portions of his letters outlining how disciples of Jesus should behave, championing those moral structures that were upheld by the Spirit's inspiration within the body of Christ, the church. And, of course, Jesus himself laid out a course of God-honoring living captured within the stunning two-part umbrella of "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Many people, however, embrace their sin, happily declaring it to be their identity. We could say that we live in a sad time this way, but people have always done this. More than 2,700 years ago Isaiah wrote these words: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20). This is what that writer I discussed earlier was talking about when she said she had given herself over to a “sin of identity.” In making her sin the essence of who she was, she had stopped calling it sin. Instead, she had convinced herself that she had no choice other than the life she was living. She was, we might say, carrying a false ID.

UNBALANCED IDENTITIES

Not all identities we take up are inherently sinful, and there are many. In our youth, we might identify as a son or daughter and as a student. When a friend of our parents asked us what grade we were in and what we liked to do, they were essentially asking us to identify ourselves: “I am in the seventh grade. I love to ride skateboards with my friends.” And what’s interesting is that these labels ignite bigger definitions of each of those identities—middle school student, skateboarder—in the minds of those who ask. They identify us with others similar to us, even though we may be outliers in these groups.

As we go on, though, we may refine our own identities. We might strive to become a straight-A student or a competitive skateboarder. We may see ourselves as successful, average, or failures. And these more precise labels can affix themselves to us in ways both good and bad.

Consider a woman who experiences one of the great joys in life, delivering a child. Suddenly, she finds herself living a new identity: mother. But a label like that rarely rests all by itself. She may think, I will be the mother my mother

was not. Or, I will be the mother who welcomes all the kids in the neighborhood. Or, I will be the mother whose children achieve great things. It does not take much insight to see what can lie below the surface of those honed identities: resentment, pride, vicarious ambition. Even the most beautiful identity has the potential to go awry.

Away from the homefront, we can find improper identities in our work, our recreation, even our church. You have likely heard one popular Christian teacher or another—it has been said more than once—announce, “I am a husband and father first and a pastor second.” This is to say, rightly, that a man’s first ministry is to his wife and children. If he is a businessman or tradesman or schoolteacher or minister, the obligations these roles (read identities) produce come after that family obligation. But what can arise in a man’s heart from such a proclamation is not so much a matter of pursuing things rightly but of saying he’s got it right. There is a certain pride to having everything in “proper Christian order,” so much so that we can make gods of our excellent living, our righteous reputation, or our biblical priorities. Many a pastor has drifted off course by guarding overcarefully that very identity: pastor.

All this is to say one very scary thing. Virtually every earthly identity has the potential to land not only in an improper place in our lives, but in a sinful place. God and his holy call on our lives are unseated in favor of an identity we clutch all the more tightly each day.

THE FOUNDATIONAL IDENTITY

After such scrutiny, we are left to wonder whether there is any identity that has the potential to remain unskewed by sin. We have all encountered obnoxious, unloving “Christians,” so even that apparently foolproof identity lacks staying power. Is there nothing we can call ourselves that

keeps us in a proper place before God and keeps our other identities from failing us?

Here is a hint: Jesus, as we noted above, made a habit of referring to God as Father. When he taught the disciples to pray, he began: “Our Father...” In fact, all through that Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of YHWH as Father, with this especially promising reference: “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 5:11).

But this title was not something Jesus gave to God generally. He also made personal reference to God as “my Father”:

- “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:19)
- “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’” (Matthew 25:34)
- “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Luke 10:22)
- “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” (John 5:17)

All of these references find Jesus calling God his own Father. But look at two other examples of this relationship. The first is from the prologue to the Gospel of John, where the writer’s own words speak plainly of this remarkable relationship: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John

1:18). The second exceptional reference comes from Jesus' anguished time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his death: "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). That Greek word Abba was a term of endearment, similar to Daddy in English.

There is no question, then, that Jesus' default identity was this: he was Son of the Father. We know from John 5:18 that this identity, spoken of publically, provided the religious leaders with the fodder they needed to indict Jesus for blasphemy. To declare God your own Father was to make yourself equal to God. In this way, that identity belonged to Jesus alone; he was, as we know, the "only begotten Son." We would never claim the same for ourselves.

To identify ourselves as the children of God, however, is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus himself and the writings of the apostles.

In Luke, Jesus spoke of the eternal identity of those who gain eternity: "They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36). Only those who are in Christ, who share in his resurrection, are called God's children.

you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:14-17).

- Peter, in his first letter: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (1 Peter 1:14).

We are, with full biblical support, children of God. We might even be stunned to discover that we are, in our adoption, made co-heirs with Christ, sharing eternally in his glory!

APPLYING THIS IDENTITY

Knowing who we are and living with that knowledge in mind are not the same thing. For instance, you may be enrolled as a student at the local university, but beyond this you must buy books, go to class, study, and take exams—that is, if you are to live out your identity as a stu-

chased a bucket of balls, and sent shots with his 5-iron out into the range until all the balls were gone. Then he put his 5-iron away, got back into his car, and drove to work. He never practiced with any other club, never played a round of golf, never talked about, read about, or watched golf. Never would we say that this man was devoted to golf. Devoted to his 5-iron, yes; devoted to golf, no.

The same is true when we take up any identity without holding first and fast to our identity in Christ as the children of God. We fall short of the fullness of what God has for us. But remembering that you are a child of God is both comforting and confidence-building.

The comforted child. Every earthly identity can vanish quickly. Jobs are lost. Businesses fail. Physical abilities wane or are disabled through injury. Spouses, parents, and even children die. As long as these identities are in place, we will want to pursue them with excellence—loving our families beautifully and working "as unto the Lord." But if any of these become default identities, we can sink into depression and faithlessness when they are lost. When instead we see ourselves first as a child of God, we have affixed ourselves to an identity that can never be lost. This allows us ultimate comfort when life's circumstances steal any of our lesser identities. We are ever assured that we belong to the God who carries us into eternity.

The confident child. When you think of a king's court, you recognize that a strict hierarchy dictates who is allowed to see the king and under what circumstances. Foreigners and enemy liaisons fall under cautious scrutiny. Courtiers and royal officials have more certain access. But children of the king are given the freest entry. They are the heirs to the kingdom, loved by the king. This is our place, bought for us by the blood of Jesus. Our eternity begins not sometime in the future, but on the day we renounce our sins and de-

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But look also at the words of the apostles.

- John, in the prologue of his gospel: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).
- Paul, to the Romans: "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit

dent.

Some time ago, at a retreat in Colorado, I spoke with the attendees about being devoted to God, and what that might look like. This led to a side discussion on the golf course about what it means to be a devoted golfer. Consider a man who woke early every morning and stopped at the driving range on his way to work. He pulled a 5-iron from his trunk, pur-

clare our belief in Christ. If this is true, then our adoption is also completed on this day. We are made God's children, and we have access to the Father. Yes, he is holy, and we do not approach him flip-pantly, in the same way we would not approach our earthly parents with impertinence. But he is also friendly—"gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love"—and we come to him with this recognition.

If ever a golfer could identify as one, it would be a professional tour player. In 2013, PGA Tour player Ben Crane found his long-lived identity as a golfer was in great jeopardy. He suffered from severe back pain that did not allow him to play practice rounds and properly prepare for tournaments. Although he eked into the FedEx Cup playoffs as the last qualifier (125th on the points list), he could not get through the first tournament. His season ended with the pain of injury and the most painful of questions:

would he be able to compete again?

When 2014 began, Crane eased into the season, unsure of his ability to play regularly. In addition, he was making changes to his swing to accommodate for his back trouble. He started reasonably well but then missed five cuts in six tournaments before a top-40 in the Byron Nelson Championship near his home in Dallas.

A week later, in mid-June, Crane showed up at the FedEx St. Jude Classic with his spirits buoyed. The weather was bad, but his game was good. On Saturday night, he slept with the lead, but because of the rain-caused backup, he would need to play 30 holes on Sunday—not a great proposition for an athlete with a balky back. Crane never let go of the lead, however, surprising pretty much everyone in winning the tournament, his first victory on Tour in three seasons.

For Crane, the win did not stand in isolation. It was set against the backdrop of all that nearly disappeared.

"I had to finally become OK with golf not being in the picture," Crane told reporters. "It felt like things were going in that direction. I just got to the place where I said, 'Lord, if it's not golf, I'll love you. If it is that would be really fun, but I know you'll provide something else that will be just as meaningful.'"

This is the assurance of a child of God. Our earthly identities may shift and exit, but our identity as children of God is unchangeable. As the constant, it truly is our comfort and our confidence. It is the life we live now and the life we will live forever. 

¹Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Crown & Covenant Publications, 2012.

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SCRIPTURE IN THIS ARTICLE

Exodus 20:3
 John 10:30
 Isaiah 5:20
 Matthew 5:11
 Matthew 18:19
 Matthew 25:34
 Luke 10:22
 John 5:17,18
 John 1:18
 Mark 14:36
 Luke 20:36
 John 1:12
 Romans 8:14-17
 1 Peter 1:14

OPPORTUNITY FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL INQUIRY AND GROUP CONVERSATION

1. What various identities do you live by in your life? Which of these only apply sometimes during your day, and which are threaded through all of your activities?
2. Where have you noticed an identity grown out of proportion in your life? Would you say that it became sinful in its emphasis?
3. Have you ever heard anyone say, "We are all God's children"? How would you differentiate this statement from the children of faith discussed in this article?
4. What is the difference between *childish* and *childlike*? What aspects of a childlike character fit well into adult living?
5. What hope does it ignite in you when you understand that you are a co-heir with Jesus? How does this affirm you in your own relationship with the Father?
6. Comforted and confident—which of these perspectives do you need most in your life right now?
7. How can you give away the truths you have learned in this article?