

Cruciform Press

# WHO AM I?

IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Jerry Bridges



# WHO AM I?

*Identity in Christ*

Jerry Bridges

Cruciform Press | Released March, 2012

To Don, whose gracious perseverance in the face of  
adversity has been a constant challenge to me.

– Jerry Bridges

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“Jerry Bridges’ gift for simple but deep spiritual communication is fully displayed in this warm-hearted, biblical spelling out of the Christian’s true identity in Christ.”

**J. I. Packer**, Theological Editor, *ESV Study Bible*; author, *Knowing God, A Quest for Godliness, Concise Theology*, and more; retired Professor of Theology, Regent College

“I know of no one better prepared than Jerry Bridges to write *Who Am I?* He is a man who knows who he is in Christ and he helps us to see succinctly and clearly who we are to be. Thank you for another gift to the Church of your wisdom and insight in this book.”

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### *Who Am I? - Identity in Christ*

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# INTRODUCTION

Who are you?

- The man sitting to my left at a dinner referred to himself as a carpenter. Carpentry is his vocation, but it is not who he is.
- A lady with a broken marriage said to a friend, “I am just a failure.” Although she had failed in her marriage, that is not who she is.
- I grew up in moderate poverty. To this day, my default answer to the question, “Who am I?” is, “I am the little boy growing up on the dirt street alongside the railroad track.” But that is not who I am.

These three responses illustrate the common tendency to answer the question, “Who am I?”, in terms of some subjective experience. Many of us answer in terms of our vocation. Others focus on a particularly formative or emotional experience.

I serve with the Navigators collegiate ministry, primarily focusing on staff development. But I am familiar enough with the student scene to know that many young people arrive at college from difficult family backgrounds,

or carrying the baggage of their own sinful lifestyles during their high school days. As a result, many of them have low or even negative self-images. Many, if honest, would answer the question, “Who am I?”, in terms of their negative or sinful experiences.

As Christians, however, our identity is to be found in our relationship with Christ, not in our subjective and often negative life experiences. In our ministry to students, therefore, we seek to help them become aware of their “position and identity in Christ,” so that their answer to the question, “Who am I?”, is based on what it means to be “in Christ.”

There is no short and simple answer to the question, “Who am I in Christ?” That position involves both privileges and responsibilities. It involves some tremendously astounding truths about us, but also faces us with some sobering facts that are just as true.

In this book we are going to look at eight different answers to the question, “Who am I?” It is my prayer that these eight answers will give us a balanced, biblical view of what it means to be in Christ.

One

# I AM A CREATURE

When we begin to answer the question, “Who am I?”, we need to start with the most basic truth about us: we are created beings. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). While being made in God’s image puts us on an entirely different plane from any of the animals, we are still creatures. This makes us both dependent upon God and accountable to God.

## **Utterly Dependent**

One of the most basic truths about all creatures is that we are dependent on God. Psalms 145:15-16 says, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” This passage refers primarily to the animal kingdom, but the principle of dependency applies to human beings as well.

**Food.** In most respects, we share our dependencies with the animal kingdom. However, there is at least one significant difference. God ordained that we humans should work to produce much of our food (see Genesis 2:15), and



in this very work we can develop a sense of independence from God. We begin to think that our material needs are met solely through our own hard work or (the modern-day equivalent) our business acumen, which provides us with the means to purchase food. God specifically warned the nation of Israel of this danger when he said,

Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

**Life and breath.** We have a need more basic than food; we are dependent on God for our very life, even our breath. Acts 17:25 says, “nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Every breath we breathe is a gift from God. And every day of life is also a gift from him. As David said, “My times are in your hands” (Psalms 31:15).

**Plans.** We are dependent on God for the execution of our plans. Everyone makes plans. In fact, life would be rather chaotic without plans. And we assume that we will usually carry out those plans. But James said this is not so. Rather he says,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year

there and trade and make a profit” -- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15)

James does not rebuke his readers for making plans, even plans to make a profit in business. What he condemns is presumptuous planning—the attitude that we can carry out our plans apart from the sovereign will of God.

In the summer of 2011, I was scheduled to teach at a collegiate summer training program in Branson, Missouri. Plans were made and tickets were purchased. My wife had even arranged to have dinner with a cousin living nearby. But instead of being in Branson that week, I spent several days in a local hospital due to an unexpected heart problem. My experience is not unusual. Most of us can recall instances when some big plans we had made were overruled by God’s plan for us. Truly we are dependent on God to carry out every detail of our lives, whether it is a major vacation or a trip to the corner grocery store.

**Abilities.** We are dependent upon God for our abilities, our spiritual gifts, and our talents. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

Every so often I encounter one of those “self-made men,” the kind who might claim to have “pulled himself up by his own bootstraps.” He likes to tell you how he

started from nothing and became successful. Some of you reading this book may have experienced that. But why did God bless your plans, why did God bless your efforts? What do you have that you did not receive? Every ability—mental ability or business ability, whether it's in the fine arts or athletics or whatever it might be—it's all a gift from God. We are utterly dependent upon him.

Obviously, the wider culture in which we live today fails to recognize that we are dependent on God for everything. Often, it rejects the idea outright. And as the influence of the culture almost inevitably infiltrates our thinking as Christians, we can begin to forget we are totally dependent on God for every aspect of our lives.

To elaborate on our dependence before God just a bit more, we can see our dependence as falling into two general categories: physical fragility and spiritual vulnerability.

## **Physically Fragile**

As dependent creatures, we are physically fragile—subject to accidents and diseases and all kinds of things. My first wife, who is now enjoying the presence of God, was always in good health. She seldom had a cold and never had the flu. The only time she had to be in a hospital was to deliver babies. But one day she went to the doctor for what she thought would be a routine examination. Before the day was over we knew she had cancer, and 17 months later she died. We are physically fragile. Regardless of how healthy we may appear today we do not know what tomorrow will bring for us.

A friend who was a missionary in Africa died at the early age of 62. Doctors did an autopsy to determine the cause of this untimely and rather sudden death and discovered that he was a victim of a combination of germs and viruses and parasites that he had picked up during years of service in Africa. Another friend was riding his bicycle early one morning for exercise and accidentally drove into a curb and went right over the handlebars, hitting his head on the concrete and breaking just about every bone in his face. We are very fragile.

Proverbs 27:1 says we do not know what a day will bring. For that matter we don't even know what the next hour will bring. You can undoubtedly supply your own stories of friends or relatives who have experienced unexpected illnesses or life-shattering accidents. So we need to recognize how fragile we really are, and as a result become aware of our total dependence on God.

## **Spiritually Vulnerable**

As dependent creatures we are also spiritually vulnerable. We have three enemies: the world, the devil and our own sinful flesh. The world—the totality of humanity that is set in opposition to God—is constantly seeking to conform us to its own standards and values. The devil comes to us disguising himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), seeking to sow doubt in our minds as to the love and faithfulness of God toward us. And then, worst of all, we have our sinful flesh which constantly strives against the Spirit who resides in us.

In the field of espionage there is often a person called

a *mole*. Typically, a mole works inside a sensitive area of government, blending in as an apparent “team player,” when in fact he or she is serving as the eyes and ears of an opposing power. This person is actually a traitor, to all appearances working for one government, but in actuality working for its enemy.

In many ways, our sinful flesh acts as a mole. It is constantly responding to the allurements of the world and the enticements of the devil, and is constantly seeking to collaborate with them. And so we are very vulnerable spiritually.

The recognition that we are physically fragile and spiritually vulnerable should make us more conscious of our complete dependence on God. As I write these words I have just passed my eighty-second birthday. As I get older it seems that God is increasing my own awareness of my dependence on him in every area of life. Do-it-yourself projects around the house that used to come easily to me don't anymore. So I often find myself crying out to God to help me complete ordinary tasks that I used to do routinely. I think this growing sense of dependency is due to more than growing older. I think it is part of God's process of maturing me as a believer. The same thing is true in both my physical life and my spiritual life. The truth, however, is that in my younger years I was just as dependent on God as I am now. I just did not recognize it.

## **Morally Accountable**

Human beings are also different from other creatures in that God created us in his image. Central among all the

things that may be included in that truth is the fact that we possess a moral dimension; we have the ability to know right from wrong, and the ability to obey or disobey God. This means that as moral creatures we are accountable to God. God stressed this accountability to the first man, Adam. Genesis 2:16-17 says, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” With that commandment, God makes Adam accountable.

This theme of accountability continues throughout the Bible. In Genesis 4, God holds Cain accountable for the murder of his brother. In Exodus 20, God gives Israel the Ten Commandments, obviously implying accountability for obedience. In Psalms 119:4 we read, “You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.” Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Paul said, “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). Finally, at the end of the age, the dead will be judged according to what they had done (Revelation 20:13). So from the creation of Adam until the end of time God holds human beings accountable to him for keeping his commandments. We are not free simply to disobey God and expect it will make no difference. This is what it means to be morally accountable.

But just as we tend to ignore or even reject the reality of our total dependence on God, so we frequently ignore or reject our accountability to him. Some years ago I

began to read a book titled *The Day America Told the Truth*. It was so discouraging I didn't finish it. The book was written by two men who had traveled throughout the United States, randomly interviewing people about their private lives and moral standards. They concluded that each person in America has, in effect, developed his own ten commandments. That is, as a nation we no longer see ourselves as accountable to God, only to self.

This is the attitude of the world we live in. And if we do not proactively remind ourselves that we are accountable to God, we can begin to think the same way — as long as we stay away from flagrant sins such as murder and sexual immorality, we tend to think that simply following our own code of conduct is good enough.

When I was a schoolboy, we had to memorize the poem *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley. To this day I recall the lines, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." At the time, we thought of that poem as teaching courage and fortitude. But it is actually a defiant statement of independence from God. And to some degree the sentiment behind those words is the default attitude of every human being. We don't like to be dependent and accountable, yet we are. Those words accurately apply to us as creatures, made in the image of God.

## **Application**

What application should we make of the truth that we are dependent, fragile, vulnerable, and accountable?

**Humility.** First, this realization should produce

humility. Recognizing that I am absolutely dependent on God for every breath and every morsel of food; seeing that I am accountable to God for every thought, every word, and every action; and realizing how often I fail to honor God in these ways — these should produce a deep and abiding sense of humility.

**Gratitude.** Second, it should produce profound gratitude. Everything good in me or around me, whether spiritual or material, is a gift from God. More importantly, as one who has trusted in Christ as my Savior, I know that he has taken on himself the accountability for all my sins and has fully paid the penalty for my every act of disobedience.

*I am a creature, created in the image of God, fully dependent on him and fully accountable to him.*





Two

# **I AM IN CHRIST**

We have begun to answer the question, “Who am I?”, with the fact that we are all creatures, created in the image of God, dependent on him, and accountable to him. This is true of everyone born into the world whether we realize it or not. But for those of us who have trusted in Christ as our Savior, there is much more to our identity than simply being creatures.

The answer to the question, “Who am I as a Christian?”, is far more elaborate and wonderful than the answer to the simpler (if still profound) question, “Who am I as a human being?” Once we are converted, there are seven additional glorious truths that come into play as essential components of our identity. These will constitute our focus for the remainder of this book.

As we seek to answer that more elaborate question, it is beyond dispute that we must start with the fact that we are “in” Christ Jesus.

What does it mean to be in Christ? Is it a question of location, like being in a house? Is it something like belonging to a club or an organization? No, the term “in Christ” is the apostle Paul’s shorthand expression for

being united to Christ. It is one of Paul's favorite expressions, and (including similar expressions such as "in him" or "in the Lord") Paul uses it more than 160 times in his letters. Clearly this is an important concept in Paul's theology. And it should be an important concept for us because *all the remaining answers to the question, "Who am I?", are based upon the fact that we are in Christ, or we are united to Christ.*

This of course begs the question, what does it mean to be united to Christ? To answer it, we begin with 1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Note the two expressions "in Adam" and "in Christ." And again in 1 Corinthians 15:45, Paul refers to "the first man Adam" and to "the last Adam," who is clearly Christ. What Paul is getting at in these two verses is that in God's way of dealing with humanity there are only two men, Adam and Christ. *All the rest of us are represented before God by one or the other of these two men.*

## **Adam as Our Representative**

In verse 22 Paul said, "in Adam all die." This idea is developed more completely in Romans 5:12-19. Verse 12 says, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...." This verse is a reference to Adam's sin of eating the forbidden fruit as recounted in Genesis 3. God had said, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Adam, along with Eve, ate,

and they both died. They instantly died spiritually, and they would eventually die physically. But Adam was not an ordinary man so that the consequences of his sin would fall only on him.

Rather, Adam had been appointed by God to represent the entire human race. As a result, the consequences of his sin fell upon all humanity. When Paul writes in verse 12, “and so death spread to all men because all sinned...,” he is referring, not to our own individual sins, but to the fact that we were so united to Adam as our representative head that when he sinned we all sinned, and so we all suffered the consequences of Adam’s sin.

This idea of the representative nature of Adam’s sin is further developed in verse 18, “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men,” and again in verse 19, “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” Note especially in verse 19 the expression, “many were made sinners.” All humanity (with the exception of Christ, who was not descended from Adam) suffered the consequences of Adam’s sin. We were *made* sinners. As each of us comes into the world, we come as sinners by nature.

In answer to the question, “Who am I?”, we would therefore have to say, “I am a sinner.” That is why David acknowledged, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalms 51:5 NIV). David said the nature he received at conception was a sinful nature. Why was this true? It was because David, like you and me, was represented by Adam in the garden, and through the disobedience of Adam, David was made a sinner.

Picture two men, Adam and Christ, standing before God. Behind Adam stands all of humanity representatively united to him. We all come into this world “in Adam.” Because of that, Paul’s descriptive words in Ephesians 2:1-3 are true of every one of us before we trust Christ. Here is what he wrote:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Paul’s description of our dismal condition can be summed up in three expressions:

- Spiritually dead
- Slaves (to the world, the devil, and our sinful passions)
- Objects of God’s wrath

Think of that! As one “in Adam” you came into the world an object of God’s wrath. It doesn’t matter whether we were born of Christian parents or pagan parents. We are all born “in Adam” and so an object of God’s wrath. All because Adam sinned.

Not only all of humanity, but creation itself suffered the consequences of Adam’s sin. Though in Genesis

3:17-19, God refers specifically to cursing the ground, Paul in Romans 8:19-22, speaks of the futility of all creation. So we all come into the world spiritually dead, objects of God's wrath, and into a natural environment that is under the curse of God. That is what it means to be "in Adam."

## **Christ as Our Representative**

The other man standing before God is the "last Adam," namely the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as God appointed Adam to represent all of humanity, so he appointed Christ to represent all who trust in him as Savior. We have looked at the consequences of Adam's representative act in Romans 5:18-19. Now observe the contrasting effects of Christ's work on behalf of all who trust in him. Verse 18: "so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." And in verse 19, "so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

For the sake of clarity, we need to draw out Paul's artful use of language in verses 18 and 19.

- Verse 18: "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." In this verse, the first appearance of "all men" refers to our universal condemnation. The second appearance refers to the universal offer of salvation, not the universal existence of salvation. There is universal condemnation, and there is a universal way of escape, yet not all will escape.

- Verse 19: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” Here, Paul follows the same artful use of language as in verse 18. The first appearance of “the many” is a universal statement, while the second appearance refers exclusively to those who come to Christ.

In each verse, therefore, the first “all” and “many” refer to the fact that all humanity has suffered the consequences of Adam’s sin. The second “all” and “many” refer only to all those who trust in Christ and are “in him.”

What are the results of being in him? We will explore these in detail in subsequent chapters, but for now I want to call our attention to the principle by which God operates.

## **Obedience and Disobedience**

In Deuteronomy 28, Moses sets before the nation of Israel two alternatives: obedience and disobedience. The results of obedience are tremendous blessings. The results of disobedience are horrible curses. These particular blessings and curses are all temporal in nature and refer specifically to the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. But at the same time they are an expression of the eternal principle by which God operates: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

By his perfectly obedient life over thirty-three years, Christ earned the blessings of God. By his death on the cross he experienced the curse for disobedience. As our

representative, all that he did in both his life and death accrues to our benefit. Someone has said it like this: “He lived the life we could not live, and died the death we deserved to die.” Or again, “He was treated as we deserved to be treated in order that we might be treated as he deserved to be treated.”

When we think of the work of Christ, we usually think of his death to pay for our sin. We call this his “substitutionary atonement,” in that he died in our place, as our substitute, to satisfy the justice of God for our sins. But what is it that makes this substitution valid? How could God’s justice be satisfied when a perfectly innocent man suffers punishment on behalf of those who actually deserve it?

The answer is that Christ stood before God as our representative. He assumed the responsibility for our obedience to the law of God, *and* he assumed the responsibility to render to God satisfaction for our disobedience. All this because we are “in him,” that is, we are united to him in a representative way.

## **The Living Union**

This truth of Christ’s representative union with us is foundational to all that we will be considering in subsequent chapters as we seek to answer the question, “Who am I?” But there is also a whole other dimension of our union with Christ that is equally exciting and that will help us understand who we are. That is what we call our living union with Christ.

This living union is best explained by Jesus’ use of



the vine and branch metaphor in John 15:1-5. Just as the branch shares in the life and nourishment of the vine, so we as believers share in the life of Christ. This living union is affected by the Holy Spirit who lives within us (See 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and who imparts to us the spiritual vitality of Christ himself.

As a young Christian I did not realize what it meant to be in a living union with Christ. My concept of my relationship to Christ was that he was in heaven and I was on earth. To me, prayer was like a long distance phone call to heaven, in which I might get through or I might not. My Christian life was largely one of self-effort.

One day in a time of discouragement I said to myself, “How can someone in Christ be as discouraged as I am?” At the time I had no idea of what it meant to be in Christ. To me it was just another expression for being a Christian. But as soon as I said those words, the thought came into my mind, (planted, I think, by the Holy Spirit), “What did you just say? What does it mean to be in Christ?”

So I went to my favorite place to spend time alone with God and began to ponder the question, “What does it mean to be in Christ?” I had memorized various verses which had in them the words “in Christ,” or “in him” or “in the Lord,” but as I said, the words had no special meaning for me. But that day, as those verses began to flow through my mind, I saw the truth in John 15:1-5 that I had a vital living relationship with Christ. I was actually a partaker of his life. I didn’t need to make long-distance calls to heaven. No, I was in him, and through his Spirit he was in me.

Of all the Scriptures that went through my mind that morning, the most exciting to me was 1 Corinthians 1:30 which in the King James Version says, “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” The thought that was so exciting to me was that it is *of God* that I am in Christ Jesus. I didn’t, as it were, get into Christ of my own doing. It was God who united me to him. It was by his action that I am in Christ Jesus.

Isn’t that encouraging? God is the one who unites us to Christ. To use Paul’s expression, he is the one who has placed us in Christ. That means we can never get out. We didn’t do anything to get in, and we can’t do anything to get out. It’s all of God.

Even today, fifty-five years later, that verse brings sparkle to my life. I often wake up discouraged about something. But as I get dressed and walk down the hall to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, 1 Corinthians 1:30 will come to my mind and I say to myself, “God, it is of you that I am in Christ.” And all of a sudden I will break into a great big smile, and the discouragement is gone.

The idea that our being in Christ is all of God, and further, because we are in Christ, his very life flows into us, could lead to the impression that we have no responsibility or part to play in this relationship. First of all, although it is indeed of God that we are united to Christ, we are united to him *by faith*. But where do we get the faith? It is the gift of God (See Ephesians 2:8-9 and Acts 16:14). But though this faith is given to us, we must still exercise it.

Having exercised faith to believe in Christ, we must

also exercise faith to draw upon the life and nourishment that comes to us from Christ through our living union with him. There are some who teach that just as the branch does nothing to receive the nourishment of the vine, so we do nothing to receive the life and energy of Christ. But this presses the analogy too far. Just as Christ is not entirely like a vine, we are not entirely like branches. Human beings are unique in that we have been created in the image of God. He has, among other things, given us minds to think with and wills which we may exercise, and he works through our minds and wills; not apart from them.

So in summary, we see that there are two related but distinct aspects of being in Christ, that is, united to him.

**Representative union.** The first is the representative union by which Jesus assumed all our responsibility to perfectly obey the law of God, and also assumed our penalty of death for not obeying. We will explore the results of this in the next two chapters.

**Living union.** The second aspect is the living union through the Holy Spirit, by which we, by faith, draw upon the nourishment and power of the living Christ to enable us to live the Christian life.

Further development of these two aspects will help us to answer the question, “Who am I?”

*By the work of God, I am no longer in Adam:  
I am in Christ, through a union that is both living and  
representative.*