

## *Scripture on Identity*

Violet Bonham Carter, writing in the 1960s about the Winston Churchill of the 1890s, said:

He belonged to a generation who had a thirst for peril, just as today we have a thirst for pensions.<sup>1</sup>

Until writing this book, I would have said the present generation lives for entertainment. Apparently, however, young people today are, above all, craving self-esteem, eaten up with their ‘identity’: ‘Who am I? What am I?’ Being conscious of oneself, one’s self-image, one’s self-esteem, one’s self-awareness, one’s sense of self-worth – this, for many, is the burning topic of the day. And the answers that most people come up with are along the lines of gender, ethnic group, career, education, social status, money, romance, and the like. These are the things by which many judge themselves and their worth, the things they think will bring them happiness, and which will make them feel good about themselves.

Take social media. For an increasing number, this virtual world is, in fact, becoming their real world; it is where they find their ‘identity’, their self-image. Consumerism feeds it. How many shop ‘til they drop’, not because they need ‘stuff’, but because of the vital role it plays in forming their ‘image’, their ‘identity’. By giving in to the ‘must-have’ drive, they boost their ‘feel-good’ factor as it plays into their search for self-esteem. It is far from unknown for young people to buy a new outfit, have a new haircut, or whatever, and to post a ‘selfie’ (a photograph of oneself) on some social media site, and measure their worth by the number of ‘likes’ they can tot up, and how quickly. A successful response will rocket them skywards; a disappointing

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<sup>1</sup> Violet Bonham Carter: *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him*, Eyre & Spottiswoode and Collins, London, 1965, p31.

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response will drag them down into depression, if not bring their little world to an end. As a result, some young people swing from euphoria to feeling suicidal. Many, though perhaps not going that far, are far from satisfied with their identity, disappointed with their perceived self-image, their sense of worth.

Take this song by Lillian Hepler:

*I am the diamond you left in the dust  
I am the future you lost in the past  
Seems like I never compared  
Wouldn't notice if I disappeared*

*You stole the love that I saved [craved?] for myself  
And I watched you give it to somebody else  
But these scars no longer I hide  
I found the light you shut inside  
Couldn't love me if you tried*

*Am I still not good enough?  
Am I still not worth that much?  
I'm sorry for the way my life turned out  
Sorry for the smile I'm wearing now  
Guess I'm still not good enough*

*Does it burn  
Knowing I used all the pain?  
Does it hurt  
Knowing you're fuel to my flame?  
Don't look back  
Don't need your regrets  
Thank God you left my love behind  
Couldn't change me if you tried*

*Am I still not good enough?  
Am I still not worth that much?  
I'm sorry for the way my life turned out  
Sorry for the smile I'm wearing now  
Guess I'm still not good enough*

*Release your curse  
'Cause I know my worth  
Those wounds you made are gone  
You ain't seen nothing yet*

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*Your love wore thin  
And I never win  
You want the best  
So sorry that's clearly not me  
This is all I can be*

*Am I still not good enough?  
Am I still not worth that much?  
I'm sorry for the way my life turned out  
Sorry for the smile I'm wearing now  
Guess I'm still not good enough.*

As I write, a YouTube post of these lyrics has over a million hits (with 28,000 likes); another has over half a million hits with 23,000 likes; another over 70,000 hits with 2,500 likes, and so on, and on.

Countless websites deal with self-image and identity, many offering advice on how people can feel better about themselves. Sociologists, psychologists, song lyricists and many others have a great deal to say about identity.

So should preachers.

After all, the Bible has a great deal to say about the subject, the identity of each and every one of us. Indeed, it could be argued that the question of identity is one of the greatest of all the issues which Scripture addresses, speaking, at least, in terms of personal experience. 'Who am I? What am I?'

Consequently, the fact that identity really is high on today's agenda is excellent news. Clearly, the time is ripe for powerful gospel preaching. Millions out there are looking for the definitive answer to the question of how to get the best identity. And the gospel has the answer – not an answer, one among many, but the one and only answer. Religion, business, entertainment, psychology, money, and so on – none of these have the answer: the gospel, and only the gospel, has the answer.

As always, however, on this as on everything else, the Bible takes its own line: it does not tread the sociological or

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psychological path as lauded by novelists, song writers or media ‘personalities’.

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The Bible knows of only two identities which ultimately count. Of course it recognises and addresses all the other questions – gender, ethnic group, career, education, social status, money and the like – but, while not dismissing those issues, it focuses on the two great identities, the only identities which really matter.

The fact is, the Bible and culture are in sharp conflict over this. Whereas most of us are interested in what we feel about ourselves – my standing, my sense of well-being, my sense of success or failure, my happiness, and so on, this being intimately linked with how we feel others think of us (peer pressure) – the Bible is concerned with how God sees us, what we are in his sight.

Two very different things.

And, I repeat, the Bible knows of only two identities which really count. And it has a great deal to say about them. It uses various terms to describe these two identities, terms which will sound odd to the man in the street. But this is only to be expected. For it is only the Bible that deals with this question in the right way. Moreover, the Bible does not hesitate to assert that the inability to understand the truth is a fundamental aspect of what we are talking about.

Everyone has one of the two identities. I do. You do.

### ***We are either flesh or spirit***

One way the Bible distinguishes between the two identities is to speak of being ‘in the flesh’ or being ‘in the spirit’. Closely connected with that, the Bible speaks of ‘the natural or carnal man’ as opposed to ‘the spiritual man’:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:6).

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There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit... For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin; he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his... Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:1-13).

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person discerns all things... But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh [that is, though they were spiritual they were acting carnally]... of the flesh... being merely human (1 Cor. 2:14 – 3:4).

He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life (Gal. 6:8).

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic (Jas. 3:15).

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God (1 John 4:2-3).

...worldly people, devoid of the Spirit (Jude 19).

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Here we have it. Mankind is divided into two – those in the flesh, the carnal, the natural; those in the spirit, the spiritual.<sup>2</sup> These are the two identities – not as the man in the street sees them, not as we instinctively feel about ourselves and what we are concerned with, but how God sees us, how he deals with us. I am either in the flesh or in the spirit. You are. We all are. There is no avoiding it. This is how God sees us, how he deals with us.

### ***We are either slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness***

Slavery is another way in which the Bible describes these two identities. We are all slaves. The question is: Who or what is our slave-master? As Christ said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34).

As Paul put it:

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:16-19).

Here we have it. Mankind is divided into two – those who are slaves of sin; those who are slaves of righteousness. These are the two identities – not as the man on the Clapham bus, Joe Bloggs, John or Jane Doe sees them, not as we

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<sup>2</sup> For more on flesh and spirit, in addition to the above quoted passages, see Gen. 6:3; John 6:63; Gal. 4:29; 5:16-17. See also my 'Flesh & Spirit for Law Men' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 2*.

instinctively feel about ourselves and what we are concerned with, but how God sees us, how he deals with us. I am either a slave of sin or a slave of righteousness. You are. We all are. There is no avoiding it. This is how God sees us, how he deals with us.

***We are either unrighteous or righteous***

We are not only slaves of sin – unrighteousness – by nature, but we are, ourselves, unrighteous, and we need to be made righteous. Out of the scores of references that could be chosen to make the point, consider Paul’s statement:

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness (Rom. 6:20).

And, of course, Christ had already declared:

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt. 9:13).

It is in the ‘effectual call’ of the elect – regenerating them by his Spirit, bringing them to himself in repentance and saving trust – that Christ causes sinners to experience this change of identity from being unrighteous to being accounted righteous, being made righteous,<sup>3</sup> in God’s sight – that is, justified:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Being made righteous’ is not only a forensic (legal) term, but far more. See my *Justification; Four*.

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...[Abraham's] faith was 'counted to him as righteousness'. But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:22-25).

While we were still powerless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned [in Adam, and, following that, in themselves]... If [that is, since], because of one man's [that is, Adam's] trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men [who are in Adam – that is, all men], so one act of righteousness [or, the act of righteousness of one],<sup>4</sup> leads to justification and life for all men [who are in Christ – that is, the elect]. 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 (Rom. 5:6-19).

...being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, [the Jews] did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes... With the heart one believes and is justified (Rom. 10:3-4,10).

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<sup>4</sup> See my *Imputed*.



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[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [the elect] might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

We are, each and every one of us, either unrighteous or righteous in God's sight.

### ***We are either children of the devil or children of God***

Another way these two identities are described in Scripture is in terms of fatherhood and childhood. Christ again:

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires (John 8:42-44).

You [believers] have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:15-17).

See what kind of love the Father has given to us [believers], that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now... Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God... By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil... Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life (1 John 3:1-14).

Either I am a child of the devil, or I am a child of God. The same is true for us all.

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### ***We are either in Adam or in Christ***

Another way in which the Bible speaks of these two identities is in terms of being in Adam or being in Christ:

As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22; see also Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:42-49).

I am in Adam or in Christ. All of us are.

### ***We are either old or new***

Then again, the Bible speaks of ‘the old man’ and ‘the new man’:

We [believers] know that our old man was crucified with [Christ] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6).

You [believers] have heard about [Christ] and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old man 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 man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:21-24).

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old man with its practices and have put on the new man, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:9-10).

The Bible also divides mankind into sinners and saints, unbelievers and believers, ungodly (or wicked) and godly. These are the identities which really count.

Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

When Christ speaks of being born again, two births are supposed: a first and a second, an old birth and a new one: and the thing born is called ‘man’. So what is born in the first birth is the old man; and what is brought forth in the second birth is the new man. That which is born in the first birth (says Christ) is flesh: it is the carnal man, wherein we have borne the image of the earthly Adam, whom the

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apostle calls the first man. That which is born in the new birth is spirit, or the spiritual and heavenly man: wherein we proceed from Christ the second man, the new man, who is made a quickening Spirit, and is the Lord from heaven, and the head of the new creation. In the new birth, men are represented as becoming new-born babes, which is the same thing as becoming new men.<sup>5</sup>

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The question we should be asking, therefore, is not: ‘Am I a successful banker, father, nurse, teacher, religious person? Do I have a good romantic relationship, or whatever?’ – that is, how do I see myself, how do I come up to my standards or the expectations of my family and friends. No! But, keeping to the biblical meanings of all the following, I should be asking: ‘How does God see me? What am I – who am I – in God’s sight? Am I in the flesh, natural, carnal, a slave to sin, a child of the devil, in Adam?’ or: ‘Am I spiritual man or woman, a slave to Christ and righteousness, a child of God, in Christ?’

Putting it colloquially, it’s not: ‘This gospel talk – what’s in it for me? How can I feel good about myself? How can I stop chasing my tail to get myself sorted out in my own mind?’, but: ‘How can I be delivered from my wretched state before God? How can I be at peace – at peace, not primarily with myself, but with God?’

And the only answer to the only question that counts? ‘You must be born again!’ – with all that that entails.

John Calvin was clear about a man’s ‘identity’ before and after regeneration:

By the phrase ‘born again’ is expressed not the correction of one part, but the renovation of the whole man.<sup>6</sup> Hence it

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards: ‘The Evidence of the Doctrine of Original Sin from what the Scripture Teaches of the Application of Redemption’.

<sup>6</sup> Original ‘nature’.

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follows that there is nothing in us [by nature] that is not sinful; for if reformation is necessary in the whole and in each part, corruption must have been spread throughout.<sup>7</sup>

‘That which is born of the flesh’. By reasoning from contraries, [Christ] argues that the kingdom of God is shut against us, unless an entrance be opened to us by a new birth. For he takes for granted that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God unless we are spiritual. But we bring nothing from the womb but a carnal man.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it follows that we are naturally banished from the kingdom of God, and, having been deprived of the heavenly life, remain under the yoke of death. Besides, when Christ argues here that men must be born again because they are only flesh, he undoubtedly comprehends all mankind under the term ‘flesh’... If [that is, since]<sup>9</sup> the flesh is contrasted with the Spirit, as a corrupt thing is contrasted with what is uncorrupted, a crooked thing with what is straight, a polluted thing with what is holy, a contaminated thing with what is pure, we may readily conclude that the whole nature of man is condemned by a single word. Christ therefore declares that our understanding and reason is corrupted because it is carnal, and that all the affections of the heart are wicked and reprobate, because they too are carnal.<sup>10</sup>

Adam was at first created after the image of God, and reflected, as in a mirror, the divine righteousness; but that image, having been defaced by sin, must now be restored in Christ. The regeneration of the godly is indeed... nothing else than the formation anew of the image of God in them.<sup>11</sup>

Taking this a little further, Scripture teaches us that we are all sinners by reason of our being human – all of us – and we all commit sins; the fundamental point being that we commit sins because we are sinful, because we were conceived and born in Adam, fleshly, slaves of sin, under the devil’s sway,

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin *Commentary* on John 3:3.

<sup>8</sup> Original ‘nature’.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin was arguing at this point against popish limitations of Christ’s words.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin *Commentary* on John 3:6.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin *Commentary* on Eph. 4:24.

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under the wrath of God. Our state, our natural condition, our human condition, shows itself in the natural and easy way we all commit sins. No child has to be taught to sin. It comes naturally: ‘Folly [self-will] is bound up in the heart of a child’ (Prov. 22:15); ‘The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth’ (Gen. 8:21).

As John Gill, commenting on Genesis 8:21, put it:

Man... cannot but sin, it is natural to him from his birth; his nature is tainted with it, his heart is full of it, and all his thoughts and imaginations are wicked and sinful, from whence continually flows a train of actual sins and transgressions.

And Calvin commenting on the same verse:

Let men therefore acknowledge that inasmuch as they are born of Adam, they are depraved creatures, and therefore can conceive only sinful thoughts...<sup>12</sup> And it is not to be doubted that the Lord declares the very mind of man to be depraved, and altogether infected with sin; so that all the thoughts which proceed thence are evil. If such be the defect in the fountain itself, it follows that all man’s affections are evil, and his works covered with the same pollution, since of necessity they must savour of their original. For God does not merely say that men sometimes think evil; but the language is unlimited, comprising the tree with its fruits. Nor is it any proof to the contrary that carnal and profane men often excel in generosity of disposition, undertake designs apparently honourable, and put forth certain evidences of virtue. For since their mind is corrupted with contempt of God, with pride, self-love, ambitious hypocrisy and fraud, it cannot be but that all their thoughts are contaminated with the same vices. Again, they cannot tend towards a right end: whence it happens that they are judged to be what they really are – crooked and perverse. For all things in such men, which release us under the colour of virtue, are like wine spoiled by the odour of

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<sup>12</sup> I have removed – for now – the following: ‘until they become the new workmanship of Christ, and are formed by his Spirit to a new life’. See below.

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the cask. For... the very affections of nature, which in themselves are laudable, are yet vitiated by original sin, and on account of their irregularity have degenerated from their proper nature... And the clause which is added, 'from youth', more fully declares that men are born evil, in order to show that as soon as they are of an age to begin to form thoughts, they have radical corruption of mind... We please and flatter ourselves to such an extent that we do not perceive how fatal is the contagion of sin, and what depravity pervades all our senses. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the judgment of God, which pronounces man to be so enslaved by sin that he can bring forth nothing sound and sincere. Yet, at the same time, we must remember that no blame is to be cast upon God for that which has its origin in the defection of the first man, whereby the order of the creation was subverted. And further it must be noted that men are not exempted from guilt and condemnation by the pretext of this bondage: because, although all rush to evil, yet they are not impelled by any extrinsic force, but by the direct inclination of their own hearts; and, lastly, they sin not otherwise than voluntarily.

David put it this way:

I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me (Ps. 51:5).

And he did not mean that his mother conceived him out of wedlock! No, by reason of his humanity – having been born by natural procreation into the world – he entered the world as a sinner, in Adam. That was his identity from day one. And it showed.

As Job observed:

Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not. And do you open your eyes on such a one and bring me into judgment with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one (Job 14:1-4).

As Eliphaz said:

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What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?... one who is abominable and corrupt (Job 15:14-16).

And Bildad:

How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm! (Job 25:4-6).

David again:

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth (Ps. 58:3).

As Paul expressed it:

We all [including believers]... were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:3).<sup>13</sup>

So it is not merely our sins which need dealing with: it is our sinful condition, our fallen-ness, our ruin in Adam. We were all born in sin, in the flesh, natural, in Adam, and, unless we are changed, unless we have a change of identity, we will die in that condition. And that carries appalling, eternal consequences.

So the burning question should be: 'How can I have my identity changed?' Note the passive. I do not say: 'How can I change my identity?' That's another difference between the world's idea of identity and the biblical. In the world's terms, a man can switch his identity; more precisely, he can switch the end upon which he fixes his identity, his 'self-esteem'. But speaking biblically – the only way that counts – the stubborn reality is that we cannot change our identity in God's sight. It is an impossibility. It has to be changed for us. But changed it must be.

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<sup>13</sup> See my *Eternal*.

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We are talking about regeneration. As we saw in the previous chapter, regeneration is the great essential. Here is the reason behind it. Let me explain.

We were all born in Adam, of the flesh, children of the devil, slaves of sin. And we cannot alter that fact, nor change our standing before God. It is utterly beyond our power. Writing to some who had had their identity, their standing before God, changed, Paul could say:

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 of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

‘You were dead’ that is, spiritually, in the sight of God. And that spells utter powerlessness. ‘You were governed by the spirit – the culture – of the world, in Satan’s grip, utterly disobedient to God’. So, how could they, being dead, have changed their identity? They couldn’t! It had to be changed for them. Who could change it? God, and only God. Christ put it beyond doubt when speaking to Nicodemus:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [regenerated] he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:3-7).

No man can regenerate himself (or, for that matter, anybody else):

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:6).

Flesh can give rise only to flesh; flesh cannot produce spirit; flesh cannot be made spirit. Everyone of us is born flesh and flesh we will remain unless newly-born spirit. And rebirth is



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utterly beyond the wit, the will and power of man; it is God's work – and God's sovereign work – from first to last:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?  
Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil...  
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick;  
who can understand it? (Jer. 13:23; 17:9).

[Christ] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:10-13).

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God (1 Cor. 2:10-12).

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:4-10).

As God foretold through Ezekiel the prophet:

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I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh (Ezek. 11:19).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek. 36:25-28).

Jeremiah, too, had spoken of it:

‘I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers...’, declares the LORD. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time’, declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more’ (Jer. 31:31-34).

Indeed, Scripture speaks of regeneration as a miracle of creation:

God, who said: ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation [or creature]. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Cor. 4:6; 5:17).

Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

We [believers] are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10).

...the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24).

...the new man, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:10).

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And, although he did not use ‘create’, James expressed it thus:

Of his own will [God] brought us [the elect] forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures (Jas. 1:18).

As did Peter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused [his elect] to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3).

As Christ prayed:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matt. 11:25-27).

As he told his disciples:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:11).

As he told Peter:

Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 16:17).

And, allowing that the apostle was a special case, every regenerate sinner can say with Paul:

I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11-12; see also Eph. 3:3,5).

And John addresses every believer in this way:

You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the

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truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth... The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 John 2:20-27).

Paul put it this way:

God... establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

Yes, regeneration is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God, a working in new-creating power and grace, producing a change beyond human comprehension – witness Nicodemus' reply to Christ.

Who needs this change? Everybody. I do. You do. Religious or irreligious, it makes no difference. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Sanhedrin, a member of the Jewish governing body, a religious man, and as such, as Christ reminded him, was a man with the reputation of being versed in the Old Testament. Moral or degraded, sincere or hypocritical, young or old, whatever our status or standing, whatever sense of identity (self-worth) we adopt, we all stand in need of regeneration. We were all born in Adam, of the flesh, children of the devil, slaves of sin, utterly fallen in God's sight, without a hope of putting ourselves right with God. To be good enough for God, we must be changed, we must be regenerated, and this means we have to know that:

...[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13-14).

This is true for me, for you, for us all:

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Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50).<sup>14</sup>

Earlier, I omitted some words of Calvin on Genesis 8:21. Here is the complete sentence:

Let men therefore acknowledge that inasmuch as they are born of Adam, they are depraved creatures, and therefore can conceive only sinful thoughts until they become the new workmanship of Christ, and are formed by his Spirit to a new life.

As Joseph Hoskins expressed it in verse:

*Sinners, this solemn truth regard;  
Hear, all you sons of men!  
For Christ the Saviour has declared:  
'You must be born again'.*

*Whate'er might be your birth or blood,  
The sinner's boast is vain:  
Thus says the glorious Son of God:  
'You must be born again'.*

*Our nature totally depraved;  
The heart a sink of sin;  
Without a change we can't be saved,  
'You must be born again'.*

*That which is born of flesh is flesh,  
And flesh it will remain;  
Then marvel not that Jesus says:  
'You must be born again'.*

*Spirit of life, your grace impart,  
And breathe on sinners slain;  
And witness, Lord, in every heart  
That we are born again.*

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<sup>14</sup> I realise 1 Cor. 15:50 teaches that the mortal must put on immortality to enter the kingdom in eternity, but the principle applies to becoming a member of the kingdom now.

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*Dear Saviour, we will now begin  
To trust and love your word;  
And by forsaking every sin,  
Prove we are born of God.*

Regeneration, the new birth, being born again, born from above, is the only way a sinner's standing before God – the only identity that really matters – can be changed, the only way in which he can be delivered from Adam and brought into Christ, freed from Satan's grip and brought into the liberty of the sons of God, no longer being a child of the devil but a child of God, no longer a slave of sin but a slave to Christ, having passed from death to life.

As I have said before, Christ was explicit:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [regenerated] he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again'. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

As Peter reminded believers:

You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God... And this word is the good news that was preached to you (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

Paul, writing to Titus, expressed it thus:

God... saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:4-7).

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Without this change of identity, we shall never see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it.

This is the identity that the unconverted need to be concerned about – not their idea of self-worth.

In light of this, we must probe how Keller addresses the unconverted on regeneration and change of identity.