



# Gospel Identity

## *Embracing Who We Are as Sent Ones*

**C**hurches spend a tremendous amount of energy on *doing missions*, which is great. But what about our identity? In all of our movement toward accomplishing God's mission work, we love to talk about the activity part of our mission. Whether it is when we come back from a short-term mission trip or when we see God move in tremendous ways in our church's local ministry, we just want to tell someone what we did! There is nothing wrong with this, and I think we all do it! We know from Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 14, when he and Barnabas came back from their trip, they gathered the church together and spoke about all the things God did while on their trip, so sharing about what we did on mission can be good and godly. Plus, people love to hear our stories. But sometimes we lose perspective on our identity.

Jesus addressed this dynamic with his disciples. We really like the story of when Jesus sent out the seventy-two in Luke 10 on a short-term mission trip. He sent them out to the places where

he was planning to go. He was strategic, sending them out in pairs and giving them instructions for the trip: he told them to speak peace and receive hospitality along the way. Now, imagine going on a mission trip and coming back and having Jesus Christ do the debrief of the trip. That would be pretty cool. The sent ones told the Sender all about their trip: “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’” (Luke 10:17, ESV). They were quite excited about what they had experienced. For those of you reading this who have been on mission trips, you often come back on a mission mountaintop. Jesus even affirmed what they experienced, when he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you” (Luke 10:18–19).

But then Jesus took their focus off of what had happened on the trip and addressed something more important—their identity: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). In our paraphrase, Jesus was telling them, *Your activity was significant, but what you really need to remember and rejoice in is that your identity is in me. Don’t rejoice in what happened but that you are mine.*

These words from Jesus remind us that our citizenship is primarily a matter of identity, not activity. While they are intrinsically connected, it’s important to distinguish between “being” and “doing.” The key to gospel intentionality is not to focus on the doing but on Christlike character expressed through the actions people see in us. Why? Because in Christ,

we have been made new. We're not the same people we were before he made us spiritually alive. Our lives are a picture of this transformation, and our actions should spring from Christ in us. It's the inner change, not the outward behavior, that the world needs to see in us.

So first and foremost, our identity is in Christ and in what he has done. We don't do ministry to others based on who we are, but based on who Jesus is. People can do very good things for various different reasons, but our motivation must ultimately be Jesus and his work for us. Our mission is not driven by the need (which is tremendous and all around us) nor by opportunity (for many of us here in the West, opportunity abounds!) but by the One who has sent us on a mission to glorify him by making disciples.

This isn't just a one-time occurrence in the Bible but also a consistent pattern of teaching throughout God's interaction with his people. Paul, writing to the church of Philippi, gives believers a similar word: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20, ESV). Paul picks up on the theme that Jesus used earlier in Luke 10:20, where Jesus told his disciples to rejoice because their names are written in heaven. It's like Paul is reminding them of the fact that because as children of God their names are written in heaven, they are therefore citizens of heaven. Their identity is tied not to their performance but to their relationship to Christ.

God transforms us and sends us—not just to *do* his will but also to *be* his people. It's not just the actions of Christ we've been sent to multiply but also the very image of God. We would do well to

always remember this. Our identity as saved ones and citizens is the starting point for living with gospel intentionality. But our identity is even richer than that! We are called sent ones, ambassadors, and salt and light.

## Sent Ones

When Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection and enters the room where they are locked up in fear of further troubles, he shows them his hands and his side. He counters their fear by reminding them of their mission in terms of their identity as “sent ones.”

Jesus says to them again, “Peace be with you,” and he adds an important piece of instruction: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21, ESV). He is reminding them of their identity as sent ones. They are not to just receive the Holy Spirit but also they have been called to be participants in what God is doing—and will do until the end. As true as this was for the disciples, it is equally true for us today. We are, as Christ’s disciples, God’s sent ones.

## Christ’s Ambassadors

Living overseas in Spain, I (Larry) have had a real glimpse into the role of an ambassador. As foreign citizens, it was necessary to go the United States Embassy to get Power of Attorney for some legal work that we had in the United States. Susan and I needed to have a legal document notarized, so we had to do it in front of an official of the Embassy. The U.S. Consulate contains the office of the Ambassador, who acts as the legal representative for the U.S. in Spain. As the official

representative of the U.S. in that country, the Ambassador's office was able to give us the official stamp that we needed. They had the authority to act on behalf of the nation they represented.

The apostle Paul uses the word "ambassador" to describe Christ followers when he writes his letter to the church at Corinth: "Therefore, we are *ambassadors* for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:2, ESV). This is really a statement of identity. We are representatives of our Lord Jesus Christ. God entrusted us to this ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). No matter where we live, we are ambassadors for Christ and we have been sent with a mission.

### **Salt and Light**

Another way the Bible describes our identity as followers of Jesus is "salt and light": "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matt. 5:13, ESV). Salt not only has the ability to make something have more flavor but it can also be used as a preservative. In the ancient days, salt was a valuable commodity. People were even paid in salt. Jesus uses the word "salt" to describe us as followers. We help preserve what is good in our culture. We can bring the flavor of God's values to our everyday interactions.

Jesus also gives us the distinction of being light:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16 ESV)

I (Larry) remember running with a friend in the Black Forest of southern Germany one time. We went out for a run around dusk, made a wrong turn, and found ourselves quite a distance from where we needed to be. While we were returning home, it became dark. We didn't have flashlights, but my friend luckily had his smartphone and we used it to find our way home. It was natural of him to share his light with me. In fact, I'm sure it never crossed his mind to *not* share his light with me. He didn't run off and leave me; he ran stride by stride with me in the dark with the little bit of light emanating from the front screen of his phone (this was before the newer smartphones with flashlights on the back). As Christ followers we are the light of the world. Not only do we concern ourselves with our personal growth and holiness as believers but we also care about others finding the path from the brightness of our light.

### **In Christ We Are His Witnesses**

Salt, light, ambassadors—these are all expressions of who we are as Christ followers. They express our identity as sent ones no matter our context. When Luke gave us the commission to go in Acts 1:8, we notice even here that Jesus uses the plural form of word “witness” as an identity marker. A witness surely

witnesses—the action of witnessing (the doing part)—but Jesus chooses the noun “witnesses” to show us how it’s a part of who we are as Christ followers. We are witnesses, which is a term of identity (the being part). Our identity leads to missional activity: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8, ESV).

### **Our “Sent” Identity Is Corporate and Individual**

Something unique happens in Acts 13 at the church of Antioch. It seems to be in Scripture that we see most “calling” experiences with individuals in different settings:

- God calling Abram (Genesis 12:1-3)
- God calling Moses (Exodus 3:10)
- Jesus calling Levi (Luke 5:27)
- Jesus inviting Zacchaeus to get down from the tree and come to dinner (Luke 19:5)
- Jesus calling Paul to be a chosen instrument to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:5-6)

We find many other examples in Scripture of how God calls an individual to do something. But among those at the church of Antioch in Acts 13, we see a different description that’s worth noting. This calling seems to be given not to an individual but to the whole church in Antioch: “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2-3, ESV). As the church was

praying and fasting, the church heard from the Spirit clearly to set aside certain individuals for the mission at hand.

Then, they went back to the praying and fasting they were doing before they laid hands on them and sent them off. Whether this was a Sunday-morning worship service or an intentional season of prayer and fasting, we do not know. What we do know is that they were praying and fasting and hearing from the Spirit, as they continued to pray and fast. Then, they commissioned Saul and Barnabas to what we now know as Paul's first missionary journey.

An important aspect of this call experience was that the calling they received was within the context of the church. Because of our highly individualistic society, we think of God's calling being between us and him personally. We do not disclaim legitimate accounts of that type of calling. But we also believe that calling often comes within the church and our corporate call as God's people.

## **Our Corporate Call Experience**

As your church devotes itself to prayer, fellowship, the teaching of the Word, and the breaking of bread, you will hear from the Spirit. As your church thinks beyond the important and regular gathering of worship into the community and to the nations, God will no doubt prompt the church to make disciples who make disciples in your context and beyond. Sometimes this will mean staying in your own community, and other times it may mean traveling on a short-term trip. It could even mean that you take your job overseas or study abroad and live intentionally for a season or longer. While other times it may

be that God is asking you to become a full-time church planter or a missionary. All of these are important tasks God may be prompting you to do, but remember that these tasks, first and foremost, stem from who we are—in our identity— in Christ and as sent ones. When you have a clear sense of an action needed to perform a specific task or mission, this is your call experience.

As part of a biblical community you also have an identity as part of a church. It is part of the DNA of a church. God has called the church to be a people who are not only recipients of the gospel but also proclaimers of the message—wherever they live, work, and play, or even move to. As a community, we are light-givers; we are salt; and we are ambassadors. We are witnesses—together. The apostle Peter describes our corporate call experience as the “priesthood” of all believers, not our individual calling only: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9, ESV). Read what Timothy George writes about the corporate nature of this verse:

In my own Baptist family, for instance, it became common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to speak of the “priesthood of the believer.” The reformers, however, spoke instead of the “priesthood of all believers” (plural). For them it was never a matter of a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers. The priesthood of all believers is a call to ministry and service; it is a barometer of the quality of the life of God’s people in

the body of Christ and of the coherence of our witness in the world, the world for which Christ died.<sup>1</sup>

So we not only have an individual “sent” identity but we also have a missional identity as a church.

We have learned from the churches with whom we work at The Upstream Collective that there is a difference in the way a church postures in this. If a church sees mission as simply one of the activities in which it takes a part, they will most likely lean more into sending out missionaries to the nations. Again, we are totally for missionaries going to the nations! Churches that embrace their missional identity will send marketplace workers, retirees, students, teachers, and full-time missionaries to places near and far. Because they understand their sentness, “regular Christians” will position themselves to make disciples and plant churches among neighbors who don’t know Jesus and among distant people with little access to the gospel. The possibilities are literally limitless because “sent” is our identity as the church.

We like what our friend Ed Stetzer writes about the church collectively and individually:

In sum, the missional mode of sentness speaks of the church (and individuals) having a missional posture. Thus, missional effectiveness requires churches to teach, train, and equip believers towards a faithful presence where

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1. Timothy George, “The Priesthood of All Believers,” *First Things*, Oct. 31, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/the-priesthood-of-all-believers>.

planted so that they may be used as God’s temple to reflect His radiant glory in all areas of life as He works through them to bless others spiritually, socially, and culturally.<sup>2</sup>

So imagine a church that embraces its sent identity in their community, city, nation, and world, sending out its members to live as salt, light, witnesses, and ambassadors who have a ministry of reconciliation to people without Christ. It affects everything we do: how we relate to our spouse, children, friends, co-workers, and people we meet in the everyday rhythms of life. In this chapter, we’ve addressed the vital importance of our rich identity in Christ. But identity always moves to action. So now, we move into the action of life where we live, work, and play. These everyday rhythms provide the context into which we live as we embrace the everyday-gospel lifestyle.

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2. Ed Stetzer, “Towards Missional Effectiveness: The Mark of Sentness (Part 5),” EdStetzer.com, April 8, 2019, <https://edstetzer.com/2019/04/towards-missional-effectiveness-the-mark-of-sentness-part-5/>.