

## CHAPTER 4

### IDENTITY

#### *Helping Millennials Understand Whose They Are*

As I (Derek) was taking my eleven-year-old to her soccer game this weekend, the song “Who You Say I Am” by Hillsong Worship filled the car. Without hesitation, I turned my daughter’s pre-game preparation into an awkward, emotional “dad-moment.”

The heart of the emotion I experience when I hear that song, and those truths, is the pain and sorrow I feel for my children knowing the world is going to tell them so many lies about who they are. We know what the world is telling Millennials about their identity—I can’t imagine what Gen Y’ers, like my children, will hear in the future.

Because we *all* need to be reminded from time-to-time (and remind those we lead) of our identity, let the truth behind these lyrics sink in and once again tell you that you are who He says you are. Think about these words as they relate to you and the Millennials in your path and ministry.

*Who am I that the highest King  
Would welcome me?  
I was lost, but He brought me in  
Oh His love for me  
Oh His love for me*

*Who the Son sets free  
Oh is free indeed  
I'm a child of God  
Yes I am*

*Free at last, He has ransomed me  
His grace runs deep  
While I was a slave to sin  
Jesus died for me  
Yes He died for me*

*Who the Son sets free  
Oh is free indeed  
I'm a child of God  
Yes I am  
In my Father's house  
There's a place for me  
I'm a child of God  
Yes I am*

*I am chosen  
Not forsaken  
I am who You say I am  
You are for me  
Not against me  
I am who You say I am.<sup>28</sup>*

Millennials are growing up in a time when the world tells them they can reshape their identity into anything they so desire.

If you don't like your gender, you can reidentify. If you don't like your spouse, you can just find another you like better. If you don't want to be labeled a sinner saved by grace, you can simply reidentify out of this teaching. If you feel this way, just be this. Your identity is not set ... until you feel like it is set (then you can always reset it later).

Just imagine the confusion an entire generation can experience in an age when absolutes are not consistently and effectively reinforced.

### **Identity and Personal Calling**

What does our identity in Christ have to do with the idea and truth of personal calling? Everything! As we talked about in chapter one, our secondary calling is such a personal and distinct journey for each unique individual. Our personal calling can't be confused with our neighbor's or even your spouse's. Calling falls at the crux of knowing God and understanding yourself.

For all of us, especially Millennials, we have to know who we are before we discover what we're supposed to do and where we should be going—the BE-DO-GO framework we talked about in chapter 1. When those three parts of our calling don't align, we run the risk of losing ourselves ... our identity.

For example, while we may know what we're supposed to DO, we compromise who we were designed to BE as Christ's heirs to achieve our goals.

Millennials are a generation intoxicated with “doing.” As Os Guinness writes so insightfully in *The Call*, “Before you are called to do, you are called to be. Before you are called to something, you are called to someone. You cannot know what you are supposed to do until you know who you are. You can’t know who you are until you know whose you are.”<sup>29</sup>

When asked to define yourself, you may consider a list of factors: age, race, culture, gender, occupation, religion, possessions, family of origin. All these characteristics are good things, but they can become insecure foundations on which to build our identity and calling, especially for Millennials.

Instead, we must help this generation build their identity and calling on something unchangeable. As Jesus tells us (and HillSong Worship reminds us): you are a child of God. Guiding Millennials to a rock-solid understanding of their identity in Christ is of utmost importance.

It cannot be overlooked or circumvented in the discipleship journey. When our identity (our BE) and calling (our DO) align, we begin to engage in the Kingdom work God has called us towards. Consider Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism:

“In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1: 9-11).

Before Jesus performs any miracle, heals the sick or walks on water, He is reminded of His true identity as God’s beloved Son. In other words, Jesus’ identity is anchored in His relationship with His Father.

Think about that for a minute. Before Jesus does any work, the God of the universe says His Son's identity is secure. That He is good enough for who He is. Jesus doesn't have to prove Himself to "earn" love.

We have observed this as a perennial struggle among Millennials. They tend to skip over discovering their identity in Christ, choosing instead to focus on their personal calling. They intellectualize their identity as Jesus' heir in their heads, but helping them believe it in their hearts is one of the greatest challenges we've faced in working with Millennials.

Since the launch of my book *Quarter-Life Calling*, I (Paul) have had the opportunity to speak to a few thousands of Millennials and field their honest questions about calling/vocation. Surprisingly, I learned the conversation of calling was rather premature for many of them. Somehow I presumed they knew who they were. But in many of their questions, I could sense an insecure foundation of who they were.

Many lacked confidence. Some struggled with anxiety and panic attacks. Others suffered from depression. In other words, I realized a large number of Millennials struggled to see themselves through God's eyes. The reason they were stuck on the calling question was because they had yet to answer the identity question. Your identity is simply what you believe about yourself. It's answering the question, "Who am I?" Only when Millennials defined themselves through God's eyes would they experience true freedom.

In my workshops, I began to facilitate a life map exercise, which soon became one of the foundational exercises I used to help Millennials see their life story from God's vantage point. I have received text messages, emails, and phone calls from Millennials who were elated to notice a change of perspective

in how they saw themselves (we share this exercise among the the tools we provide in chapter five).

Another way I help Millennials see themselves through God's eyes is to ensure they palpably experience the love of God. Only by experiencing the love of God can you truly understand that you are a child of God. They need to understand and embrace how much God loves them.

In her book, *Without Rival*, author Lisa Bevere shares how one day she dozed off at her laptop working on her manuscript for her next book. When she woke up, she writes that she suddenly heard the Holy Spirit say, "I do not love my children equally."<sup>30</sup>

"But God," she told Him, "You've got to love us all the same. It's not fair."

Then she felt God tell her, "I don't. Same would mean one of you would be replaceable. Equal means love can be measured, but my love is immeasurable. I do not love my children equally. I love them uniquely."

The truth is that each and every person on this earth has been fashioned for the love of God regardless of our age or generation. Our Father's love cannot be likened to a pan of brownies that a loving parent cuts into equal portions, so that no child feels slighted. God's unconditional love for us is not subject to portion control.

Do you realize that God loved us before there was a beginning, and His love for us knows no end? We can turn from Him, run away, and even make our bed in hell, but our actions will not stop His *agape* love.

This is so critical because identity rooted in anything apart from a personal relationship with Jesus drives us away from our calling. This is especially true for Millennials. This

generation is consistently tempted to prove themselves and earn God's approval through their work.

In other words, instead of being anchored with a secure sense of identity that's expressed in their vocation, they tend to define their identity in the work they do.

When considering our identity, we can go back to Ephesians 2:10. This identity-shaping verse reminds us, "*for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.*" We are *His* workmanship—not our own.

We have been carefully crafted by the master craftsman who always knows exactly what He's doing. As leaders, we have to affirm this generation that they are not the result of mass production with a guaranteed rate of failure or need for adjustment. Even the best assembly lines in the world produce lemons at a predictive rate.

If Millennials' identity is not rooted in and dependent on our Father, helping them find and engaging in that work He has planned for them is near impossible.

### **The Purpose of Identity**

Millennials need to understand (and it's our responsibility to help them make the connection) that their identity is not an end in itself, but for the sake of service to the Most High King.

1 Peter 2:9-10 says, "*But you are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*"

I (Derek) had the great privilege of walking with a young attorney years ago. This attorney and his family were a big

part of our family's life, and they were well acquainted with our journey of adopting our oldest daughter.

One early morning, Joel said that he and his wife were praying about adopting a child, but he was afraid he could never love an adopted child as much as his biological daughter. We talked through his question intently. Years later, they have an amazing little boy they call son, through adoption.

Joel and his wife walked directly into their call to adopt their son, and now Joel continues to give away his life by serving on the board of Both Hands, an organization that helps families raise funds for their adoption.

Watching Joel move from concern about his heart and his capacity to love to an abounding love for his son has been one of the most rewarding parts of my journey. Joel's identity is now one of adoptive father, as well as adoption advocate who will impact many lives over many years. This speaks directly into Joel's identity as adopted child of God with a new calling prepared beforehand by His father.

God created each of us to be who we are so that we might all declare the praise and glory of who He is. He gives us our identity so that He can be seen through us. We are His image bearers. Who we are is for the sake of His glory and His Kingdom.

### **Understanding Our Priesthood Identity and Role**

After discipling many Millennials, you begin to understand how the failure to understand some basic theological points plays into their everyday journey. One foundational teaching we have too often left out is "the priesthood of all believers" that Paul identifies and defines in

Ephesians chapter four. When this vital teaching is missing from our identity as Christ followers, that gap shows up in how we live our lives.

Since the launch of the early church, the role of laity and clergy has ebbed and flowed. At times, the laity has more actively taken on “priestly” roles while at other times in our history, the clergy has grabbed the reins and run ahead.

It’s hard to put yourself in a pre-Luther time when the prevailing belief said that we needed a human intercessor to approach the throne and understand Scripture for ourselves.

Imagine working to comprehend your unique role in God’s Kingdom if everyone told you that you needed a chaperone to approach the Author of your purpose. You can start to see why Luther rebelled so vehemently and dramatically as he expressed the truth he read in Scripture.

Satan’s brilliant scheme is to not come at us in a head-on assault like Luther fought against, but rather to come from the flanks. Think about the generations of well-intended Christ followers who have been lulled into latency by the subtle idea that, as laity, they had certain (lesser) roles and responsibilities in carrying out Kingdom work —while the licensed, ordained, seminary-graduating clergy had the more serious roles and responsibilities.

I (Derek) remember sitting at lunch with a group of business leaders walking through a gospel engagement framework (taught by IHS Global in more than one hundred countries). The framework they teach is easy, gospel-centered and designed to happen in real life (as opposed to just sounding good in theory).

After hearing the overview of this framework, a young business leader in the group stood up and said, “That sounds

great, I think I could use those ideas with people, then get them to ‘you pastor guys’ to close the deal.”

I loved that this friend was willing to be part of these gospel conversations, but it broke my heart that he only saw his role in someone’s journey going only so far. He didn’t understand his identity and thus, role, as a royal priest.

### **Living Out This Royal Role**

Part of the challenge is also our success. Yes, we have moved beyond the notion that we need an intercessor to approach the throne of God in prayer or interpreting His Word. And beyond thinking that only official clergy can perform the sacraments.

However, we’re missing the truth that our royal identity as part of the priesthood of believers goes further and deeper into our daily life. This is key to unleashing the latent potential of the Millennial generation.

As leaders, we have to help the Millennials in our path understand that they’re not living out the pro-active, life-on-mission extension of the role as part of a royal priesthood. Timothy George, author and dean of the renowned Beeson Divinity School, expounds on this:

*In other words, the priesthood of believers is not a prerogative on which we can rest; it is a commission which sends us forth into the world to exercise a priestly ministry not for ourselves, but for others—the outsiders’—not instead of Christ, to be sure, but for the sake of Christ and at his behest.<sup>31</sup>*

We claim the idea of us as priests for what it does for us (direct access to our Father), but we tend to leave it there, not allowing the responsibility to push us to carry the fulness of Jesus into every nook and cranny of society.

We don't take hold of every promise we've been given—that we are holy priests who happen to put food on the table as accountants, web developers, elementary teachers, etc.

When the Millennials I (Derek) have discipled started to incorporate the full idea of the priesthood of the believer into their identity, I watched how they began to fully embrace their identity and responsibility of being a minister of the gospel.

In 2009, when I joined the staff of a megachurch in Brentwood, Tennessee, I learned a valuable lesson in how culture plays into the notion of the priesthood of all believers. My position on staff was community group pastor.

We put so much emphasis on doing life in small groups that my five colleagues in similar roles turned out to be the pastors of our sub-congregations—we just never taught behind the podium. The group's other four pastors moved from different areas of the country specifically to be in this role while I transitioned in from a businessman and lay leader at the church.

We all helped adults find community groups and train leaders, but the majority of my time was spent discipling men. I knew a lot of the guys I began to disciple before joining the church staff, and some of them are my very best friends today.

After several years of doing life as a community group pastor, our team started to see how the relationship I had with the men I discipled looked different than the relationship with the guys my colleagues discipled.

Though we were doing many of the same things, our relationship just looked different. My relationship was more casual. We were invited to do life with the other families more often and were just more integrated into the community.

This even showed up in my wife's relationships. Jennifer formed deep friendships and really learned to walk alongside of the families under my care. Because of these dynamics, Jennifer and I thoroughly enjoyed ministry together at the church even though we were told that the church was hiring me and Jennifer was not expected to do ministry with me.

I certainly appreciated the sentiment that she was not expected to treat ministry as a vocation, but we sure had a good time doing ministry together.

As our group was talking about this, it dawned on me that I was treated differently because I was one of them, working in the marketplace and then given the privilege of being paid by the church to focus on them and others while setting aside other money-making endeavors. The men and women I led never saw me as hired clergy brought in to lead them.

And I worked hard to create a culture that helped people see their pastor (me) as nothing special—*they* were the heroes on the front lines of ministry. They took on the mantle of the priesthood because they knew their “pastor” was really no different than them.

I tell that story to to show you that when someone sees and understands their identity as being a minister of the gospel, it changes how they see themselves--and how they think God sees them. And it changes how they operate in His Kingdom. If we don't help Millennials understand their identity in Christ and role in Kingdom life, they will never search for their unique contribution to the Kingdom.

Feeling comfortable coaching Millennials can take practice and persistence. Hopefully, up to this point we have provided some helpful insights and thought leadership to help you shift the paradigm in your heart and head. Now we want to provide some tactical ideas for leading or coaching Millennials.

**COMMUNITY DISCUSSION** ([www.millennialscalling.com/community](http://www.millennialscalling.com/community)):

- How do you see Millennials specifically struggle with their identity?
- What have you learned about helping Millennials solidify their identity in Christ?
- Has the idea of “the priesthood of the believer” influenced your ministry? How?