

# Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

## A Christian Identity Crisis?

written by Bob DeWaay

Consider what Paul said about himself **after** he had come to Christ:

*“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”* (Romans 7:24)

*“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”* (1Corinthians 15:9)

*“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.”* (2Corinthians 12:10,11)

*“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”* (1Timothy 1:15)

Paul also described himself as he was **before** his conversion:

*“Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”* (Philippians 3:4-7)

Some suggest that many Christians are suffering from an identity crisis and prescribe mega-doses of self-affirmation as the cure. A Christian friend recently handed me a bulletin insert that was

distributed in a large Evangelical church. The card asks in bold letters **“Who am I?”** and proceeds to answer, “I am accepted . . . I am secure . . . I am significant . . .” with lists of attributes and facts about Christians. These facts were gleaned from Scripture and placed into first person “I am” statements. The credit for the ideas on the card is given to Dr. Neil Anderson who wrote, Victory over the Darkness - Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

In this issue I critique Dr. Anderson's book and the therapy it promotes. Key issues addressed are: Should believers practice “self-talk” or “self-affirmation” as therapy? [I realize these are not Anderson's terms, but they describe the practice promoted in his book]; Are we the same as Christ or are there differences?; Is the corporate identity and function of the church to be distinguished from the individual?; Are Christians sinners saved by grace or are they “saints who occasionally sin”?; and Are we really having an identity crisis or is something else at the root of the problem? The thesis of the book is that Christians fail to live victorious lives because they do not know who they are. The heart of Anderson's solution is the use of “I am” sayings that will help Christians understand their identity.

### Who Am I?

In Victory Over The Darkness, Dr. Anderson presents the self-understanding of one's identity as a Christian as the key to spiritual victory. In laying the foundation for his theology and therapy, Dr. Anderson states that the Fall created needs in humans that are the keys to human behavior. He states, “All sinful behavior is a wrong attempt at meeting these basic needs.”<sup>2</sup> One need specifically addressed is the need for “self-worth.” Dr. Anderson writes, “Self-worth is an identity issue. Your sense of personal worth comes from knowing who you are: a child of God.” The result of

seeing the issues of the Fall from a human, psychological need perspective, is that the issues are redefined. This is the same trap others have encountered who have viewed Biblical issues through the spectacles of current psychology.

If sin is a wrong attempt to meet needs, why did Adam and Eve sin? They already had everything they needed. They did not **need** to seek autonomy, they chose to in willful rebellion. Sin goes far deeper than “looking for love in all the wrong places” as a popular song puts it. Even for Christians, passages such as **Romans 7** suggest that the problems are deeper than a lack of understanding of personal identity.

Having posited identity as the key issue, Dr. Anderson proposes a solution. He lists thirty six “I am” sayings, “scriptural traits” that are “. . . guaranteed to you by the Word of God simply because you were born into God's holy nation by faith in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Each trait comes with a Biblical reference. The first two are, “I am the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13)” and “I am the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).”<sup>4</sup> The second one is startling since it is exactly what Christ said in one of His “I AM” sayings in John (**John 8:12**), in which He was claiming deity.

### Self-affirmation as Therapy

To make these “I am” statements effective, Christians are urged to read them and speak them out loud. “In my conferences we do this by reading the ‘Who Am I?’ list aloud together. . . read it aloud to yourself right now, Read the list once or twice a day for a week or two.”<sup>5</sup> Though he does not call it such, positive self-talk is a popular therapy in secular circles also. Is self-talk an acceptable therapy for Christians if the affirmations are scriptural?

While it is true that some methods can be neutral and thus used for good or bad purposes, it is also true that there is danger in using novel techniques that are currently the rage in the world. Not every method or technique is neutral. For example, **Deuteronomy 18:10-14** lists forbidden techniques for learning the future and in **verse 15** promises them an alternative, “*The Lord your God will*

raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.” According to Peter in **Acts 3:22**, Jesus is this promised prophet. If you want to know the future, read what Jesus says about it, do not do like the pagans and use forbidden divination techniques. Not everything that seems to “work” is permitted or expedient.

The danger in “practical theology” is that the drive for a practice that “works” could change one's theology, however well intentioned the endeavor may be. In this case, the practice of self-affirmation has created the need to change the person of Biblical verbs. “The list below itemizes in first-person language who you really are in Christ,”<sup>6</sup> introduces us to the thirty six “I am” confessions. Is there any difference between Christ telling us as the church, “You are the light of the world,” and me telling myself, “I am the light of the world?” If so, the therapy has already begun to change the theology.

### Who is Speaking to Whom?

Dr. Anderson cites many clients' testimonies to bolster his theology. For example he states, “One man drove several hundred miles to attend one of my week-long conferences. On his way home he decided to use the ‘Who AM I?’ statements as a personal prayer list . . . It took him nearly five hours to drive home, and he was praying about ‘Who AM I?’ traits all the way!”<sup>7</sup> The man later testified that this experience was “life-changing.” What I cannot understand is how self-talk like, “I am a Child of God . . . I am Christ's friend . . . I am a saint,” etc., can be “prayer.” To whom are we praying and listening?

Jesus taught us to pray, “*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name*” (**Matthew 6:9b**). In this we attribute holiness to God. The Scriptures call us saints and calls us to holiness (see **1Peter 1:16**). Although we are called “holy ones” by God and we confess the holiness of God, we are not, however, told to call ourselves holy. The change in persons from the second to the first may seem innocent enough, but it changes the emphasis and tenor of the Scripture. “*Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own*

*lips*” (**Proverbs 27:2**). This proverb expresses wisdom that is still recognized. When one of his peers or perhaps his manager calls a baseball player, “the greatest active player” it is received far better than if the player says of himself, “I am the greatest baseball player.”

Paul said, “*For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends*” (**2Corinthians 10:18**). Generally, self-commendation is not taken seriously. We ought to be more concerned about what the Lord says about us. When He calls us “saints” we ought to be humbly grateful for the unmerited favor He has bestowed upon us, realizing that it is His doing that we are in Christ (**1Corinthians 1:30**).

When false apostles through self-exaltation and self-promotion succeeded in capturing the minds and hearts of the Corinthians and turning them against Paul's teaching, he was forced to defend himself and tell of his apostolic credentials. The hesitancy he shows to this process is instructive.

*If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself!* (**2Corinthians 11:30; 12:5-7**)

Though compelled by the carnal minded Corinthians, Paul recoils from crediting himself with things that would make him appear great, even though the things were true. They caused Paul to do what he considered “foolish” (see **2Corinthians 12:11**). “*But he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord*” (**2Corinthians 10:17**).

Boasting in the Lord is not accomplished through self-affirmation, even about true things. It is the proclamation that God chooses the poor, the despised, the weak and the useless to be used by

His grace to accomplish His purposes. “. . . *For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*” (**1Corinthians 4:7b**)

Are the thirty six “I am” sayings recited as personal therapy boasting? They are not showing a humble and contrite attitude. “*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*” (**1Corinthians 10:12**). We should be careful not to be glibly claiming our rights and status without also remembering our proneness to go astray.

Taking all of the positive things the Bible has to say about who God has made us to be and reciting them in the first person singular to bolster our status in our own eyes is not in keeping with the spirit of the New Testament. “*But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.*” (**1Corinthians 11:31,32**). We also need a realistic, critical view of ourselves.

When God is speaking to us about ourselves we ought to listen. We must, however, be content with the second person. Changing the tense to the first person and making ourselves the speaker and the ones spoken to does change the theology involved. It causes it to be more man centered and less Christ centered. We also must listen to **all** He says, not just the positive things.

### The Uniqueness of Christ

The doctrine of the person of Christ is a cardinal doctrine of Christianity that was the focus of the first three centuries of church history. The creeds of the church affirm that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God. The Gospel of John presents Him as the eternal Logos, the One who was with the Father from all eternity and is the “only-begotten” (“unique, only one of His kind” - NASB marg. **John 1:14**) of the Father. Jesus is the Creator (**John 1:3; Colossians 1:16**). Paul tells us, “*For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.*” (**Colossians 2:9,10**).

Neil Anderson makes a troubling statement that does not seem to fit with these Biblical teachings: "As a child in God's family, you are the recipient of His nature, and His riches, just as His first-born Son is."<sup>8</sup> Christianity affirms the two natures (deity and humanity) of Christ in one person. It is not correct to say that Jesus is the recipient of the Divine nature -- this He shared with the Father from all eternity. Jesus took on the form of a servant (**Philippians 2**) and became man in the Incarnation; He already was God. Also, the idea of humans being recipients of God's nature (terminology only used in **2Peter 1:4**) is to be understood with caution; we will never have the very nature of God, He is infinite and we shall always be finite.

The section of Victory Over the Darkness that introduces the "Who am I?" statements begins with the header, "What Is True of Christ Is True of You." Charitably, we can assume that Dr. Anderson, as an evangelical, is speaking only of Christ's humanity and not of His deity. Also, we assume that he would acknowledge that in His Incarnation Jesus is like us except being sinless (**Hebrews 2:17; 4:15**). Even with these unacknowledged disclaimers, the statement, "That which is true of Christ is now true of you, because you are *in* Christ,"<sup>9</sup> is misleading. For example, it is true that Christ is head over all things, but it is not true of us, since He is our head, we are under Him. Even in his communicable attributes, what He is in His sinless perfection, we are by legal imputation or by partial and progressive impartation; but not in the exact sense that He is.

For example, Christ is holy eternally, completely, and in all the fullness of which the term "holy" can be predicated of the perfect God-man. We are called holy, made holy, and commanded to become holy. There was a time when we were not holy. There will be a time when our holiness shall be complete. **Hebrews 10:10,14** says that we "*were sanctified*" (perfect passive - "having been made holy") and that we are being sanctified (present "progressive" passive participle - "continually being sanctified"). Positionally ("in Christ"), we are, "... *those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling* . . ."

(**1Corinthians 1:2**). However, Peter instructs us, "*like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior.*" (**1Peter 1:15**). We are told to be holy because it is neither automatically or always the case, progress is possible. Christ is eternally holy in the greatest sense of the term. That makes Him different and unique.

Many things that are true of Christ are not true of us. He is the Creator, we the created. He is the one who calls us, we are the called ones. He is the head, we are the body. Jesus Himself spoke of the distinctions, "*You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.*" (**John 8:23b**). "*For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens*" (**Hebrews 7:26**). There are some things that are true of Christ and true of us as His people, but there are many distinctions and differences. If we fail to acknowledge this, we are not doing our job of telling the world about who He is, especially in this age of pantheism and false "Christs." Taking only statements of the similarities between us and Christ, confessing them for therapeutic purposes, and ignoring the many differences does not do justice to the truth.

### Our Corporate Identity

We have looked at what happens when we change the **person** of Biblical verbs. Another problem arises when the **number** of Biblical words is changed. For example, we are called saints, but it does not follow that "I am a saint" is an appropriate calling card or self-affirmation. The word "saint" is used in the singular only once in the New Testament and that in **Philippians 4:21**, "*Greet every saint* . . .," which includes the whole group - a plural idea. Sainthood is a corporate identity, not merely a personal one.

The personal confession, "I am a saint" is missing from the New Testament. I am not saying that Christians are not saints; I am saying that what God calls us as a group may not properly translate into an individualistic confession to enhance one's personal identity. It is interesting that Paul writes the church-

es addressing them as saints but is careful to use terminology about himself that is unostentatious. Whatever good he says about himself is carefully attributed to the grace of God (as in **1Corinthians 15:10**). We ought to follow his example.

A clearer indication of the problem of changing the number of a verb or pronoun from plural to singular is seen in the "I am the light of the world" statement. When made by Jesus, the pronoun is singular. When made about us, the "you" is plural in the Greek. Jesus said, "You [plural] are the light of the world . . ." (**Matthew 5:14a**). William Hendriksen comments on this passage, "Collectively believers are "the light." Individually they are "lights" (luminaries, stars, (Phil. 2:15). Both ideas may well have been included in the words as spoken by Jesus, though the emphasis is on the collective."<sup>10</sup>

No one Christian can be the light of the world in the same sense that Christ is. The church is an instrument of God through which He shines His light in a dark world. If there were only one Christian on the face of the earth, the light would be quite dim. In contrast, John says that Christ is the "true light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (**John 1:9**).

However, it is true that the corporate identity of the church has ramifications to the individual, and that the individual must understand his or her place in the body of Christ. Paul uses the "body" metaphor in **1Corinthians 12** to show us how much we need one another and the importance of every member. Those of us who are Americans need to be reminded that we live in an individualistic culture that is far different from the community oriented Hebrew culture of the first century. The comforting words to the "saints" in various cities Paul addressed to churches to be read in churches. They did not work out these inspired teachings as isolated individuals living in their own mental worlds.

Most of the metaphors about the church (the "called out ones") have a group identity involved: kingdom, bride, body, royal priesthood, sheepfold, building, etc. An individual citizen, priest, sheep, stone, etc. cannot perceive his identity without a correct understanding of the group. It takes some changing of

the texts to make them into confessions to bolster our “self-worth.” Our importance and value was found in relationship to God and others, not in individual consciousness.

### Sinners Saved by Grace

Our problem, according to Victory Over the Darkness, is that Christians think that they are sinners saved by grace, when in fact they are not. Anderson states,

Many Christians refer to themselves as sinners saved by grace. But are you really a sinner? Is that your scriptural identity? Not at all. God doesn't call you a sinner; He calls you a saint - a holy one. If you think of yourself as a sinner, guess what you will do: you'll live like a sinner; you'll sin. Why not identify yourself for who you really are: a saint who occasionally sins. Remember: What you do doesn't determine who you are; who you are determines what you do.<sup>11</sup>

In a later chapter he reveals that he does not believe that Christians have a sin nature. He states, “When you came into spiritual union with God through your new birth, you didn't *add* a new, divine nature to your old, sinful nature. You *exchanged* natures. . . . Becoming a partaker of God's nature is fundamental to a Christian's identity and maturity.”<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Anderson discounts Paul's testimony in **1 Timothy 1:15** as being evidence that Christians can consider themselves sinners saved by grace by stating, “. . . he was referring to his nature *before* his conversion to Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Again, Dr. Anderson is playing loose with the tenses of Biblical verbs. Paul said, “. . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom **I am** foremost of all.” Surely Paul was not thinking of his present behavior when he described himself as the foremost of sinners; but neither are people who call themselves sinners saved by grace. Remembering that but for God's grace we would still be mired in darkness is not going to make us commit sin as Anderson contends.

Paul is simply being careful to give glory to God and not to make ostentatious and pretentious statements about himself. There is nothing in us that com-

mended us to God, the merit that pertains to our salvation is wholly Christ's. Being a “saint who sins” is hardly less incongruous than being a sinner saved by grace.

There are many problems with the theory that Christians no longer have a sin nature. It is outside of the scope of this article to deal with this matter thoroughly. A careful study of **Romans 6 - 8**, **Galatians 5**, and other pertinent passages shows that Anderson's position is suspect. It is also not in keeping with the historical teachings of the church on this matter. For example, the reformers taught that the sin nature still exists. Luther called Christians, “justified sinners.” If a Christian thinks that by letting his “nature” have its way (do what comes naturally) he will not be led into sin he has many problems ahead.

### Conclusion

Dr. Anderson's thesis that the major reason Christians have problems is a lack of knowledge of who they are does not hold up to the facts. It is important to know and believe everything God says about us. It is not, however, a lack of knowledge that lies at the heart of the problem. It is, “*the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life*” (**1 John 2:16**). James tells us that “*Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust*” (**James 1:14**).

Basic problems with which everyone has had to deal throughout history will not disappear with a dose of self-worth based on confessions of one's new identity. The cross and one's daily dependence on God's grace to resist temptation and to walk in faith and obedience are much more essential. We do not need to know our “self-worth” and “self-identity” so much as we need to know Christ.

Though Dr. Anderson's purpose to help Christians live a victorious life is a good one and many testify of positive results, caution is in order concerning the underlying theology. Some good, practical insights are also to be found in the book. I cannot recommend it, however, because there are too many theological flaws, particularly in His doctrine of the person of Christ. The uniqueness of Christ must be emphasized if people are

to know who He is. To know who **He is** and to know Him as Lord are much more important than self-worth and self-identity. Worth and identity are by-products of the creative activity of God, not therapeutic goals.

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#### End Notes

1. Neil T. Anderson, Victory Over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ; (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1990).
2. *ibid.* 35.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.* 47.
6. *ibid.* 45.
7. *ibid.* 48.
8. *ibid.* 49.
9. *ibid.* 45.
10. William Hendriksen, The Gospel of Matthew, “New Testament Commentary” series, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 284.
11. *op. cit.* Anderson; 44,45.
12. *ibid.* 73.
13. *ibid.* 72.

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