

Identities

“...put off your old man...and put on the new man, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”
(Ephesians 4:23,24)

“To God’s elect, strangers in the world...live your lives as strangers here...as aliens and strangers in the world...live as servants of God” (1 Peter 1,2)

Paul’s letter to the believers at Corinth is radically counter-cultural. Paul certainly was familiar with Greco-Roman culture. He was a disciple of the super-eminent Gamaliel, which would be like being on the faculty of Harvard or Stanford. Yet almost everything in his letter is not only different from the values, beliefs and traditions of his readers, it is positively *against* those cultural norms. Writing to the church there, Paul’s intent and desire was that those believers also would be counter-cultural. Paul was a changed man after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road and then going back and re-reading the Old Testament Scriptures. And the purpose of this letter to the Corinthians was to persuade the believers there – and us today – to be changed also.

It wasn’t just Paul who had this view of Christian identity. Peter did too. The Spirit of God intends us to be radically different from our unbelieving friends and neighbors. We’re to be so different, living lives so totally unlike theirs, so imbued with righteousness, that people around us would see us as just like Christ Jesus. In fact, if we were just like Jesus, as God intends for us, they might hate us in the same way that Christ was hated when He was here. Or... If we were just like Jesus, people might come to love Jesus and glorify Him.

The New Testament was written in large part to teach us what that new, different, Jesus-imitating person should be like. But before we can adopt new characteristics, we more fundamentally need to have a new self-identity. And there’s the problem today. We hold an identity that’s essentially not different from our unsaved neighbors. We’re first of all Americans. And then we’re doctors or farmers or teachers. Or we’re Irish or Jewish or Italian. Or we’re evangelical, or Baptist, or Pentecostal. Or black. Or Hispanic. Or...hey, there are lots of categories into which we plug ourselves and derive our self-identity. Like our neighbors, we have some recognizable self-identity and we live our lives according to the accepted traditional features of that identity. For most of us, our identity as an American is the main and most important one. America is our home, its our particular world. America’s culture, history, traditions, government, values, outlook on life...everything that makes America what it is, is our own. Christianity is something we add to our American identity, like a thin veneer of beautiful cherry wood covering plywood.

So our lives aren’t really that different from our neighbors except that we go to church on Sunday mornings but they don’t. And maybe we give money to certain Christian organizations, but they don’t. And we don’t commit adultery, but they might. Apart from these things, we’re fully embedded in American life and culture. We’re glued to it. We’re not counter-cultural, we’re fully cultural. Our problem is we’ve had a false identity; not the identity we should have had if we were Spirit-led followers of Christ. In love, God really should take away the world we’re so in love with, thereby exposing our identity as empty, ungodly, and unworthy of our calling.

Well, America isn’t our home anymore. God is evidently doing something unique, He’s taking our false identity away from us. If you haven’t noticed, this isn’t the country you grew up in. Commentators like to say that we have “a new normal,” but that’s not right. We no longer have *any* normal, because what’s “normal” is in flux, always changing, as we are being led inexorably into becoming a new, “transformed” society. In almost every domain of life, America has changed.

Consider these examples (not in any order): Banks no longer give interest on savings and don’t intend to, ever. Being frugal and saving for the future is now despised as a reactionary, middle class value. The Federal Reserve is now an agency of the government to plan and manage our economy. The Republican Party now wants big government, spending massive amounts of money; we are but one election away from becoming a one-party nation. Marriage and family are irrelevant. A “husband” and her wife or a “wife” and his husband can adopt and raise children. Men can no longer be said to live with their wife but with a “partner.” Sex, boy or girl, is legally whatever that one wants it to be at the moment. Christopher Columbus, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were wicked people. Marxism and/or its corollaries now is an integral component of higher education and shortly of secondary ed as well. Paid hooligans run amok in the streets. Our young people, with raised clenched fist, mindlessly mouth slogans they don’t (and never will) understand. “Hard work is the key to success” is anathema; it’s a slogan of white oppression. The desire to better oneself, to acquire knowledge, to be productive in some way has become a despicable bourgeois value. We now regard sociopaths as national heroes. Holding to a religion is a contemptuous reactionary superstition. Freedom of speech is increasingly despised and may soon actually have to be repealed, ostensibly because it’s used to hurt others but mainly so that only carefully censored speech is permitted. In movies, the bad guy now wins, or there is no clear good or bad guy. Women are totally free to abort their unborn babies at will. What traditionally was equality of opportunity is now Stalinist equality of outcome. Music, art and architecture are totally bizarre; beauty is no longer a quality to be desired, it’s just another despicable

bourgeois value. Conversation now must include obscene words to be meaningful. Reasoning and analysis of ideas is exploitative if not useless; only emotional responses are genuine, and those are primarily determined by the mob [oops, I mean community] on social media. Patriotism is not just obsolete, it's obscene. The list goes on... Yes, we can still buy corn flakes, and the electricity is still on 24 hours a day. But this isn't the America we once knew.

So, if America isn't our home anymore, what should be our response? (a) Struggle to change things to go back to the way things were? Impossible and narcissistic. (b) Vote for Trump? Dangerous, because who knows what he'll be like when he's no longer accountable to his base, and he's no conservative anyway. (c) Leave the country? Actually, this isn't a bad response if the plan is to go to Europe to evangelize Muslims there. Otherwise, impractical. (d) Accept all the changes and adapt to them? Some of us undoubtedly will do just this, sacrificing biblical precepts for comfort and security. How about: (e) Pray for our nation for revival, and/or for God to change hearts? Sounds pious. But more likely God is purposely allowing this transformation of America so that our thoroughly pagan nation is fully deserving of wrath and the judgments of Revelation. So those prayers won't be answered. What response then is appropriate?

It appears that God is making the America we so closely identify with to be so ugly, so alien, so totally pagan, that it's impossible for us to love it anymore. We will instead love God and His will as more precious. We'll identify as a follower of Christ. We'll identify as a new kind of living temple in which God Himself resides. We'll identify as the body of Christ carrying out Christ's ministry of bringing people into the Kingdom. We'll at last adopt the attitude Peter enjoined on us, being "strangers" in our own land. We'll "put on the new man" and live as clones of Christ, serving God as His "ambassadors," ministering reconciliation to all who will listen.

Just as America is changing, so must we. Just as America is being transformed, so must we be transformed. It means we'll need to do things we've never done before, such as, for example, personally sharing the Gospel with others. We can all, every one of us, take a few hours each week to stand on a street corner downtown and hand out Gospel tracts to passers-by. Change also means we'll need to spend more than a minute or two each day in prayer. Change means reflecting on the cross and what the cross means today regarding willingness to suffer in weakness, trusting God to vindicate us in His time and in His way. Change means studying the New Testament for how we can put into effect in today's world the imperatives of Christian living God has revealed, so that we can glorify Him with our lives instead of just existing. We do want to make our lives count for Christ, don't we?

What we need to do first is acknowledge that what's happening in our nation, to our nation, is from God. He loves us and wants us to change. In love, to help us identify as "strangers," He has made our nation strange to us. So we need to repent of our past folly and commit to being and doing all that He wants us to be and to do going forward. We will necessarily be counter-cultural, because we're no longer joined to a culture that is rebelling against God but rather are imitating and serving Christ. That's what it means to be "a new man." We don't add Christianity to our life. Christianity replaces it.

But perhaps you disagree. You may say, "America may have its faults, but it's still a God-blessed nation, and it's right to be patriotic. Our founding fathers were Christians, and our rule of law, our free market economy, and our civil liberties are all something distinctive, to be proud of. I was born here, I support America and am glad to identify as an American." And it must be admitted, America is a place to love. It has absorbed many Christian virtues, it has the accoutrements of an advanced civilization, and it has political freedoms. No one is trying to illegally enter and live in Russia or China. So to you who are in love with America and all it puts on offer, I say, Beware! If you identify with evil, you partake of that evil. America is not Israel! It's another of the Gentile nations that, at the Tower of Babel, God forsook due to their rebellion.

The Northern Kingdom was idolatrous not only because they worshipped Baal, but because they identified with what was not God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul and all thy might" means loyalty and commitment to God to the total and absolute exclusion of *everything* else. That's why Peter wrote to fellow Jews, who had far better reasons to identify with Judea and with Judaism than we have for identifying as Americans, "live your lives here as strangers in fear." "As strangers" means abandoning their identity as Jews and identifying instead as "a people belonging to God." It means abandoning affinities to their culture and their heritage and their traditions so that they could "sanctify Christ as Lord," so that they could "bear the name of Christ." Union with Christ, the very basis of our salvation, means our identity is Christ. I'm in Christ and Christ is in me. I'm a totally new person. And my new citizenship is heaven, with Christ.

Our self-identity is key to our self-understanding, to our worldview, to our role or purpose in life, to our relationship to God and to others. Paul's self-identity changed instantly when he encountered the risen and living Christ. God expects us to change our self-identity on the basis of His Word. The Word of God is the truest reality there is. Christ Jesus is the greatest reality there is. And His love is the most compelling reality there is. If these don't change us, if we don't bring our lives into full conformity with these realities, may God have mercy on us.