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"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

— GALATIANS 2:20

WHAT POSITION DO YOU PLAY?

1

(THE ATHLETE AND IDENTITY)

Great athletes must know their role to reach their goal.

As a boy growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, I (Tony) used to play sandlot football every Saturday afternoon. One Saturday, the guys gathered to play, chose sides, and prepared for the kickoff, only to discover no one had brought a ball. Since there was no ball, there was no game in spite of the fact we sincerely wanted to play. The ball is the main thing without which everything else becomes a waste of time. Many Christians who are busy with religious activity still find themselves unable to score in life because the main thing is missing, namely a true understanding of their identity in Christ.

Antwaan Randle El, formerly of the Pittsburgh Steelers, stands as an enigma in the NFL world. Starting as quarterback at Indiana University at the college level, he excelled in both passing and rushing. As he approached graduation and the NFL draft, many teams reviewed his skills, yet overlooked Randle El as more of a runner than a franchise quarterback. Everyone, that is, except the Steelers.

Early on, the coaches worked with him on a role quite different from his college days. He was quickly trained not as the starting quarterback but rather as a wide receiver who served as a backup quarterback for the team. While some in Randle El's situation would have become angry, he pursued his new role with passion, earning a starting role and greatly contributing to the team's improvements.

Fast-forward to 2006. The Pittsburgh Steelers stand in Super Bowl XL against the Seattle Seahawks in Detroit, Michigan. During a critical fourth quarter drive, Fake-39 Toss X-Reverse Pass is called. A few moments later Randle El, from his receiver's spot, lofted a 43-yard touchdown pass to Hines Ward that secured Pittsburgh's 21-10 victory. *He knew his role and he helped his team reach its goal.*

Each Christian has been given a unique identity in Christ that provides understanding for all of life. What many of us need, however, is an identity check. We need to understand who we are in Christ. A person's identity is a critical commodity, especially in today's information-driven culture. Your identity has great financial gain not only to you but to someone else who could steal it to make a profit. Identity theft has become so pervasive that when a friend in the Dallas area recently moved and ordered new checks, his bank recommended that he not print anything on them except his name and address to minimize the chance of someone misusing his information.

Having a clear identity is of such significance that people will adjust their lives significantly to appeal to certain groups. These alterations can include purchasing the latest clothing styles, driving a certain type of car, or buying a home in an affluent neighborhood. A few years ago there was a string of cases in which several high-profile public figures, including coaches, were found to have lied on their résumés to help them obtain a new position. Much of our culture focuses upon helping people look, feel, and act as something different, because someone has convinced them that their true identity is not good enough. In fact, millions of sports fans spend millions of dollars piggybacking on the identity of others by purchasing jerseys with someone's number. They have no number of their own.

Besides trying to buy an identity, another common mistake we make is *linking identity with activity*. We do this when we identify ourselves by our job or sport. This tends to occur frequently among people who follow Christ, because it reduces the Christian life to a set of activities to perform or avoid. One of my (Tony's) former seminary professors once taught at a large state university where faculty thought Christians were just people who didn't smoke or drink. He said he had a difficult time convincing them that Christianity was not a performance but a relationship with Christ.

This confusion is common but crippling if we desire to thrive in our daily walk with Christ, because our identity *begins* at the cross. It starts with identity, grows as we give Christ supremacy, and shines as we offer our lives to the One who provided the ultimate sacrifice in our place.

The Reborn Identity

When a ballplayer hits his stride, it is called being in the zone (round zone). It is when all cylinders are clicking and you are maximizing your potential and abilities. As Christians, however, God has put the zone in us.

When we trust in Christ alone for salvation, God implants a new nature deep within our souls. This new nature serves as the reference point for our identity. When God gives us this new nature, He also destroys our old nature. This death took place on the cross of Jesus Christ when He died for the sins of the world. Our identity as Christians begins at the cross.

Galatians 2:20 communicates everything we need to know about our identity as believers in one dramatic sentence. If we can absorb and apply what God's Word teaches in this essential verse, we are well on our way to strong maturity, because our identity is the key to our spiritual development.

Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." Check out the changes that take place in our lives as believers.

1. Your life is over (a new role)

The first phrase alone alerts us to something radical taking place: "I have been crucified with Christ." We can personalize it with our own names, saying, "_____ has been crucified with Christ." As a believer the transaction has been completed.

To be crucified is to die. We understand that Jesus died on the cross, but His death also brought about the death of our sinful natures when we believed

in Him. When we trust in Christ, He lives within us, destroying the control sin had in our lives. As Paul asks, “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2).

Our old self is dead, crucified with Christ on the cross and buried with Him when He was buried in the tomb (Romans 6:4). This spiritual death means sin no longer defines who we are. Our problem with sin is now a problem of the body we live in, not of our divinely transformed soul. Yet many believers are not developing because they are still living according to rules of their past life. They haven’t realized that their former life is dead in Christ (Colossians 3:9).

Romans 6:5–6 tell us, “If we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with.”

A connection with Christ occurred at the cross, complete with life-changing implications. Your life is over at the time of faith in Christ. A new “reborn” life has begun.

➔ *How does it feel to read that your life has been crucified in Christ? What positive factors result from starting life over as a Christian?*

2. Your new life has just begun (a new goal)

Jesus’ death on the cross was physical. Our death in this case is spiritual. However, this does not mean it is any less real. So in case you are beginning to think, *I didn’t feel as though I died when I gave my life to Christ*, realize that the feelings you had or did not have are not the most important issue. Second Corinthians 5:17 informs us that we have become new. Everything associated with our old lives has passed away.

So how do we make this real in our lives? Romans 6:11 says, “Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” *Consider* was an accounting term in Greek. It meant to add up the figures and arrive at an answer. God says we died with Christ, and when He rose to new life, we were resurrected with Him to begin a new way of life. God even gives us a physical

symbol of demonstrating this death and resurrection through the tradition of baptism.

In Romans 6:3–4 we read, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Baptism is not salvation, but it is a public picture of what Jesus did for us. When we are placed in water at baptism, we are picturing our identification with Christ in His death. As we emerge from the water, we declare our identification with Christ in His resurrection.

One day at football practice my (Jonathan’s) coach taught me a new blocking technique. It wasn’t natural for me; as a matter of fact I was terrible at it. It

seemed that the harder I tried, the worse I per-

Christ wants to give you everything you need to grow and live to be more like Him.

formed. One day my coach told me that the ability I needed to be successful at the technique was already in me. I just needed to stop trying so hard and let what was in me show. He was right! When I followed his advice, I excelled at the very area that had been a great weakness.

Living the Christian life is the same way. We know it is very difficult to maintain the walk to which God has called us. It seems the harder we try the worse it gets. We sometimes hear the comment “I’m just a sinner saved by grace.” This is only partially true. We are new creations in Christ who *continue to struggle* with various sins in this life. A Christian should not say, “I am a homosexual” or “I’m a slacker,” but, “I am a new person in Jesus Christ who is struggling with the sin of homosexuality or with self-discipline.” If you define who you are by what you do, you confuse identity with performance. Knowing who you are in Christ completely changes your reference point.

Paul takes it a step further, writing, “We have the mind of Christ”

(1 Corinthians 2:16). We now have the capacity to think God-like thoughts. This new mind also includes our emotions, desires, attitudes, and all of the other components that make up the core of our being.

Finally, we also have a new location. When Christ raised us from the dead, He raised us all the way. After Christ was resurrected, He ascended back into heaven and is seated “at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). If our identity is bound up in Christ, guess where it leads? We are also seated “with Him in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6). That’s a spiritual reality, not just wishful thinking. Everything that happened to Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection happened to us spiritually.

➔ *What are some ways you have seen people confuse their identity in Christ with their performance for Christ? How does this actually hurt our spiritual lives?*

The Reborn Supremacy

Our identification with Christ is complete: “It is no longer I who live, but *Christ lives in me*.” What a powerful phrase! Something supernatural happens to our soul as we come to know Jesus Christ.

The most essential truth of the spiritual life is that Jesus Christ is in us when we trust in Him. Yet Galatians 2:20 takes this concept much deeper, promising that Christ is both in us and is living through us.

1. Home-field advantage

The difference between these two is the difference between our unchanging standing in Christ and our ever-changing state in Christ. Ephesians 1:13 shares that we are “sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.” This is His seal of security no one can break and that guarantees us heaven.

But Christ wants to do much more than promise us heaven. He longs to live in us—to move in and fully express Himself through our lives. Sadly, many believers headed for heaven are not maturing on earth because they refuse to allow Christ full control in their lives. They treat Christ the way we treat guests.

We invite our guests to make themselves at home, but we don't usually mean it. We don't want them roaming around the house, looking through our personal files, and eating whatever they want from the kitchen.

It's the difference between living and being alive. Jesus says, "I want to express the power of My supernatural life through your life. I want to live in you." The Bible says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The purpose of everything we experience is that "the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (verse 10).

➤ *When was a time you remember feeling the importance of the home-field advantage during one of your games? How does having Christ at home within us provide an advantage for our spiritual lives?*

2. You can't do it on your own!

Trying to live the Christian life in your own strength is like wishing we play like Allen Iverson does on the basketball court. If Iverson wrote a book about how to split defenders and shoot three-pointers, you could read and practice every detail in order to perform at his level. Would you suddenly play at his level? Of course not! Why? Because even with the information, we cannot copy the person of Allen Iverson through our basketball skills.

Let's pretend, however, that Iverson would be able to claim, "I am going to enter your body and use your hands and legs to score just like me." Then the situation would be different. With Iverson, this is fiction; with Christ, this is reality. He wants to give you everything you need to grow and live to be more like Him.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul wrote, "By [God's] doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption." In other words, when we received Christ we gained everything. He is our reborn identity. As Philippians 4:13 words it, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

➤ *What is discouraging about not being able to live a Christlike life on our own? What is encouraging about it?*

The Reborn Ultimatum

The third section of Galatians 2:20 provides the practical application for this reborn life. We have the ultimate example through Christ: “And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

1. The caffeinated Christian life

What is a caffeinated Christian life? The opposite of “letting go and letting God,” the caffeinated Christian life is a high-energy pursuit to live the life of Christ by faith. A lot of times we sit around thinking, “God, I know You want me to read the Bible. I’m just waiting for You to give me a real desire to do it.” There’s nothing wrong with praying for a desire to learn God’s Word, but it is more likely to happen when you turn off the TV and actually open your Bible. God is probably not going to levitate your Bible onto your lap and open it to the place He wants you to read. We must work in cooperation with Christ’s work in us.

A person who has been using drugs for years may need other people to help him overcome his addiction. Even then, when he turns over every part of his life “as instruments of righteousness to God” (Romans 6:13), he will find new power to break the destructive addiction. Christ can provide all of the needed power, but not apart from our mind and will.

➤ *In what areas of your Christian life do you most tend to “let go and let God”? What is an area where you need to concentrate to live out your faith with passion?*

2. The credible Christian life

Our lives must also offer credibility. Many of us have been carrying around spiritual fake IDs for so long we have trouble remembering who we really are. Whether through our private list of rights and wrongs, an “it’s all good” attitude about life, or hiding a personal sin, our tendency is to cover up anything in our lives that does not make us look good.

While there are definitely things we should and should not be doing, it’s

helpful to learn that we will continue to struggle with sin even as new creations in Christ. Paul, as one of the top early church leaders, revealed his personal struggles by saying he still acted in ways he knew he should not be living (Romans 7:15). Paul had to come to grips with the fact that it wasn't him trying his best to obey God, but it was Christ in him that gave him power to overcome sin (Romans 8:10–11).

➤ *Why do people try to obtain and use fake IDs? How is this similar to how some people try to live their Christian life? What is an area of life you prefer to cover up because it does not make you look good?*

3. The centered Christian life

Maybe you're ready now, thinking, "I want Christ to live in and through me, but how do I do it?" The answer is found in a centered Christian life, a life focused on the phrase found in Galatians 2:20 that says we live this new life "by faith in the Son of God."

There is no recipe or easy formula for accomplishing this superhuman task. The centered Christian life is a life of faith from start to finish. A reformation was launched four hundred years ago when Martin Luther read that "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). We live "from faith to faith," from one level of faith to the next.

Faith is not just believing in God, but believing God when He says we cannot live like Him apart from Him. Paul learned that the only way he was going to make it was to tell Jesus, "I can't live this life by myself. I need You to live through me."

The centered Christian life is lived by faith in Christ, but not a cold, academic faith. Galatians 2:20 also reminds us that Christ "loved me and gave Himself up for me." That's the language of a loving, intimate relationship. Jesus wants you to trust Him, but not the way you trust your bank to take care of your money or trust your car to complete your commute. Living by faith is cultivating a relationship with the living Christ who wants you to identify with Him so completely that there is no question as to who is your life (Colossians 3:4).

As followers of Christ, we are totally forgiven, fully accepted, absolutely loved children of God. This is our new identity in Jesus Christ. As we understand our new role in Christ, we can pursue the glorious goal of Christlike living and soar to new heights of spiritual growth.

➤ *Name a person who has lived as a strong example of spiritual strength for you. What did he or she do that made them such a glowing reflection of Christ? What would you like to do that is similar?*

takeaway

You must know your role to reach your goal. (We have a new identity in Christ that redefines our roles and goals in this life and for eternity.)

training points

What parts of your new identity in Christ do you find the most difficult living out in daily life? For example, do you often struggle to believe you can now overcome a major sin area in life because Christ lives in you? Write down your thoughts to share with the group and to reflect on during the upcoming week.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

transforming others

Who can I tell about my new identity in Christ? What is a specific way I can communicate my new life with them?

What group of people could I best have an impact on based on my past experiences and how Christ has changed me since? Where is one place I can begin in connecting with this group of people, even beginning with just one person?

the coach's perspective

Ask your players, "How do you want to be remembered?" As an optional exercise, have each person write an obituary, telling how he or she would like to be remembered after their time on earth is over.