Identity

The topic of identity is a burgeoning field of research in Pauline Studies. It covers a wide range of material and is multidisciplinary in nature, studied from many angles, including anthropology, philosophy, psychology and sociology. Human identity, personal identity, social identity and Christian identity all fall within its orbit. Investigations of identity seek to answer questions concerning what we are, who we are, whose we are, and who or what defines us as human beings. "Identity is that sense of being and self-understanding that frames our actions, communicates to others who we are, and sets the agenda for our acts" (Snodgrass, 9).

The word "identity" does not appear in English Bibles. However, there are many related terms and concepts. In certain contexts, *zoē* could be translated as "identity" (e.g., Col 3:3) and *psychē* as "person" (BDAG, 1099; Louw and Nida, 321). Further, Paul treats questions of race, gender and sexuality, subjects central to postmodern discussions of identity. Even if it is not the exclusive focus anywhere in Paul's letters, identity is covered almost everywhere; "theological anthropology is an implicit and derivative doctrine" (Vanhoozer, 180). The broad topic of identity relates to and overlaps with our understanding of Paul's teaching on many other subjects, including salvation, ethics, Christology, eschatology and the church.

Central to Paul's thinking about identity is the idea that humans are social beings and live in shared stories (Bauckham, 138-39). At the heart of Christian identity in Paul's letters lies three overlapping notions that assume the relational and narratival dimensions of identity: union with Christ, being known by God, and adoption into God's family. Before examining them, Paul's understanding of human identity more generally needs to be considered, not least because for Paul Christian identity is a renewal and completion of human identity.

1. The Image of God
2. Anthropological terms
3. Traditional Identity Markers
4. Paul's Self Understanding
5. Individual and Corporate Identity
6. Naming and Imagery
7. Union with God's Son
8. Known by God as his Child
9. Adoption into God's Family

1. The Image of God

The declaration that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God is stated five times in the opening chapters of Genesis (1:26, 27 [2 x]; 5:1; 9:6) and is rightly seen as "foundational to the biblical concept of humanness" (Johnson, 564). Paul uses image of God language once in reference to humanity, but more often with reference to Jesus Christ and Christians.

In 1 Cor 11:7 does Paul speaks of males (*anēr*) as "being" (*hyparchōn*) the image and glory of God. This suggests to some that Paul understood Adam to be created in the image of God, but not Eve. However, in 1 Cor 15:49 he says that "just as we have

borne the image of the earthly man, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one," suggesting he understands all humanity to share (even if imperfectly) in the image of God as it has been passed down to us through Adam. Understanding 11:7 in the light of 15:49, suggests that for Paul, Adam was created directly in the image of God and that the rest of us (from Eve on) are made in God's image as we inherit it from Adam and our parents (cf. Gen. 5:3; 9:6).

The connection between the image of God and sonship is central to Paul's notion of Christian identity. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing that image of God language is conceptually familial (cf. Ortland, 685; Rosner 2017, 80-85). That the image of God marks human beings as sons or children of God is clear from the usage of "image and likeness" language in Genesis 5:3 to denote a family relationship between Adam and Seth and the identification of Adam as the son of God in Luke 3:38, and it is implied in Paul's Areopagus speech in Acts 17 where he describes humanity as "the offspring of God." Paul's notion of salvation as adoption into God's family assumes that human beings have lost their full status as God's children. The two notions come together in Rom 8:29 where the purpose of being conformed to the image of God's Son is that Christ might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Paul's creation of Christian identity, central to his person and mission, builds on the essentials of human identity, including the image of God. Our redemption in Christ entails the restoration of God's perfect image in Christ. In Rom 8:29 believers are conformed to the image of God's Son (cf. 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15): "It is Christ who supplies the pattern for the renewal of the new self" (Moo, 268).

Col 3:10 describes Christian believers as the "new humanity" (*ho neos anthrōpos*), being progressively "renewed in the knowledge of the image of its creator." The growth in knowledge that is both the goal and means of the renewal in question is knowledge of God and of Christ and also knowledge of ourselves in relation to God and Christ. Renewal into the image of God is the outcome of the process and it is no accident that Paul has already said in the letter that the Son of God is "the image of God" (Col. 1:15).

2. Anthropological terms

Anthropological terms, the ways an author refers to the constitution of human beings, are a window into their view of human nature and identity. Paul has more ways of referring to human beings than any other biblical author, including words translated "body," "flesh," "soul," "spirit," "mind," "heart," and "inner being" (see Dunn, 51-78; and Rosner 2017, 66-74). In line with OT anthropology these are generally best understood as aspects of a human being rather than parts of a human being. They represent human existence viewed from different angles.

Taking the first six in pairs, from Paul's use of *sōma* we learn that humans are social beings, marked by social interdependence and responsibility, and also fleshly, *sarx,* that is, frail and weak beings (cf. 2 Cor 4:11), corrupt and hostile towards God (Rom 7:18; Gal 5:24). Humans are rational beings, with a mind, *nous,* capable of soaring to the heights of reflective thought (Rom 12:2), and also experiencing beings, with a heart, *kardia,* capable of emotions (Rom 5:5), thought and will (1 Cor 7:37). Humans are also living beings, *psychē,* animated by the mystery of life as a gift (Rom 11:3), and spiritual

beings, *pneuma,* with the capacity to relate directly to God (Rom 8:16). Finally, Paul sees humans as whole beings, determined from within; in three places Paul uses the expression, "inner being," *ho esō anthrōpos* (Rom 7:22; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:17).

Paul's anthropological terms highlight the essence, limitations and potential of human identity. We are more than our bodies, but not less than them. Being embodied, we are social beings, defined by our relationships, and the body also has a place in the age to come (see 1 Cor 15:35-44, where *sōma* occurs 9x). We are also flesh, that is, mortal, and driven by our desires, which are often harmful and in opposition to God. As beings with mind and heart we are capable of the highest thoughts and the deepest emotions. And as souls and spirits, we are alive and have the capacity to connect with the living God. From our *psychē* we know that we are alive; from our *pneuma* that we can be alive to God. To neglect any one of these dimensions is to distort human identity.

3. Traditional Identity Markers

As a first-century Jew, Paul's world was divided in binary terms, between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor. One side or the other of these pairs would have been among the first answers to questions of identity for every person in the ancient world and each of them made a world of difference.

Paul reflects the Jew / Gentile division at several points in his letters (cf. the refrain, "Jews and Gentiles" in Rom. 1:17; 2:9, 10; 3:9; 10:12). But in 1 Cor 10:31 Paul breaks with this view and introduces a third grouping that supersedes the other two. There he mentions Jews, Greeks (another term for Gentiles) and "*the church of God*." At root, being a Jew or a Gentile is displaced in importance by a more important identity, that of belonging to the new people of God.

Indeed, at first blush, it would seem that Paul removes any significance to a person's race, ethnicity, nationality, culture and even gender in Gal 3:28 where in Christ Jesus "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" (cf. Col 3:11). The same goes for marital status, occupation and possessions in 1 Cor 7:29-31, where Paul counsels that believers are to "live as if you were not married, had no dealings with the world, and did not take full possession of anything that you own" (my own translation).

However, in Paul's hands such markers of identity are "neither obsolete nor irrelevant when it comes to real life situations … but are relativized by the call of Christ" (Campbell, 93). They all remain important for identity, but none is all-important. Paul's reflections on his own missionary practice in 1 Cor 9:20-22 make this clear: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews," and so on. Far from ignoring cultural differences, Paul is willing to surrender his right to live according to his own culture, context and preferences and adapt to the realities and ways of those with whom he works and whom he hopes to reach for Christ.

Paul's advice to married men in 1 Corinthians 7:29b to live as if they were not married is not an instruction to neglect their marriage or to stop sleeping with their spouse, let alone get divorced. Rather, he aims to downgrade the importance of whether a person is married or not in the light of the coming of Christ: for "the time is short" (v. 29) and "this world in its present form is passing away" (v. 31). Paul is urging those who are

married, and those who are single for that matter, not to define themselves by their marital status.

Paul reasons that since believers know where the world is headed, they are not to allow the world to dictate their identity or existence. The prospect of a new heaven and new earth takes the edge off prevailing troubles on this earth and may even enable a believer to endure a marital or social status they consider unsatisfying or undesirable and still glorify God within it. According to Paul, being married or not is not central to the identity of Christians. Neither is being sad or happy nor having certain possessions. Paul is not disparaging a full-blooded engagement with the world (cf. 1 Cor 5:10b), but instead wants it to be tempered by a sober assessment of life's ups and downs in the light of something that eclipses them.

A key feature of Paul's view of personal identity is not to regard other people "by what they seem to be" (2 Cor. 5:16; CEV). The gospel, and especially eschatology, lead to "the relativization of all things in Christ" (Campbell, 89): "He sees with utterly differently eyes, from a perspective that radically relativizes, if it does not wholly obliterate, all social and historical categories" (Barclay, 189-90).

4. Paul's Self-Understanding

Paul embodies much of his teaching on identity and links it to his own story. This is the case with respect to the relativisation of traditional identity markers, as well as many other aspects of Christian identity. For instance, Paul's autobiographical statement in Phil 3:3-7 exhibits the devaluing of his Jewish identity, which he "counts as loss" for the sake of gaining Christ.

Paul's is a paradigmatic story for Christian identity. This is most clear in Gal 2:20 ("I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"), where he depicts a newly constituted self that lives in union with Christ. "When the 'I' is crucified with Christ, the ego is unmoored from any prior sources of identity, worth, and direction, or conversely, all sources of shame, dishonor, and despair; it is severed from the relational matrix shaped by family of origin, social context, economic status, and so forth" (Eastman, 174).

5. Individual and Corporate Identity

Does Paul think of human beings in individual or corporate terms? Much recent Pauline scholarship argues that Paul is a communal thinker and may not even have a concept of the individual. Social-scientific approaches argue that in the first-century Mediterranean world "persons considered themselves in terms of the group(s) in which they experienced themselves as inextricably embedded" (Malina, 62). Anti-individualism was also a key driver for the New Perspective on Paul, with Paul's doctrine of justification understood as "primarily oriented toward the interpretation of the people of God" and union with Christ as "a communal concept" (Davies, 716). A third anti-individualist trend in recent Pauline studies is the apocalyptic understanding of Paul, with its emphasis on the cosmic triumph of God at the heart of Paul's view of salvation. Martyn (101), for example, argues that "the root antidote to an individual sin is not an individual instance of forgiveness … [but rather] vanquishing the enslaving power of Sin."

However, it is more accurate to think of the individual and the community belonging together in Paul's thought. In terms of the history of ideas, Larry Siedentop's tour de force, *Inventing the Individual*, credits Christianity for the concept of ourselves as free agents, an essential notion for the very idea of a personal identity. According to Siedentop (62), in Paul's hands, "the identity of individuals is no longer exhausted [as it once was] by the social roles they happen to occupy." Paul had something to do with the very idea of the individual. There is no need to dismiss the importance of the individual in order to note the fundamentally communal context of his letters. While Paul knows nothing of an isolated individualism, his understanding of salvation in Christ is still deeply personal (see e.g., Rom 9:3; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 6:17; Phil 3:13-14).

Dunson argues that Paul conceptualises the individual in a wide variety of ways. In Romans, for instance, there are: *characteristic* individuals, such as the weak and the strong in 14:1-15:7, which Paul uses to urge individual action; *generic* individuals in chs. 2-3, to underscore the prospect of final judgment of all people, both Jews and Gentiles, as individuals; *binary* individuals, in chs. 9-11, to stress the centrality of individual faith (see 10:6-13) for both Jews and Gentiles; *exemplary* individuals, such as David and Abraham in ch. 4, whose examples of faith are commended; *representative* individuals, that of Adam and Christ in ch. 5, a sort of corporately determined individuality; *somatic* individuals, the individual embedded within the believing community in ch. 12; and *particular* individuals, in ch. 16, each with their own distinctive identity. For Paul, there is no individual outside of community, equally there is no community without individuals at the heart of its ongoing life; "the individual and the community are two sides of the same coin" (Dunson, 15).

Recent research informed by Social Identity Theory has led to a better understanding of the social nature of identity and its impact on group interaction in Paul's letters (see Tucker and Baker; Tucker and Kuecker). Tucker, for example, examines the nature of Roman civic identities in Corinth, and argues that "some in [the church in] Corinth were continuing to identify primarily with key aspects of their Roman social identity rather than their identity 'in Christ' and that this confusion over identity positions contributed to the problems within the community" (Tucker, 2). And May's examination of sexual identity within 1 Corinthians examines the nature of "criss-crossing social identity" to consider how various categories may overlap and provide nuanced interaction in different areas of identity construction. He concludes that *porneia* creates an identity for the offender that symbolizes their belonging to the group of outsiders, which helps explain Paul's vociferous opposition to sexual immorality.

6. Naming and Imagery

"Words, including self-designations, have an ability to lead to a radical reinterpretation of identity" (Trebilco, 300). Along with filling out the character of Christian identity, many names for and images of Christians in Paul's letters are both individual and corporate. Paul calls Christians saints, believers, the church, and most commonly, brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*). Indeed, "the frequency with which the early Christian movement in general, and the apostle Paul in particular, employed this expression [brothers and sisters] is unprecedented" (Burke, 174). Fictive kinship created a pervasive ethos of love, mutuality, togetherness and belonging in Paul's churches,

reflecting and enhancing their individual and community identity and cohesion (Trebilco, 65).

The extensive use of the sibling language in the early church stood out in the ancient world, with the one exception of ancient Jews whose kinship could be traced in general terms through blood lines (see many examples in 1 and 2 Macc. and generally in Rabbinic texts). While the language of brother or sister was not unheard of in pagan philosophical circles, groups like the Epicureans or Cynics preferred the language of friendship. Paul, on the other hand, avoids calling Christians his friends: "Paul was familiar with the conventional discussions about friendship but studiously avoided using the word itself" (Malherbe, 104). Paul's preference for sibling language points to his concern not just for individual morality but also for the corporate life of God's family: "We cannot begin to understand the process of moral formation [in Paul's letters] until we see that it is inextricable from the process by which distinctive communities were taking shape" (Meeks, 5).

"Metaphors play a significant role in the formation of social identity" (Lim, 48). Along with sibling metaphors, Paul used temple, body and marriage imagery as a means of social identity construction and maintenance, "to restructure the social reality to match the social vision of the gospel and to realign the values of the churches to the foundational beliefs of the gospel" (Lim, 198). Three times in 1 Corinthians, for instance, he tells the church that they are the temple (3:9,16,17) and once that individual believers are the temple (6:19; Gupta, 74). And many of the moral exhortations in the letter build on the temple imagery, including those associated with wisdom (chs. 1-4), purity (chs. 5-7), edification (chs. 8-14) and glorifying God (6:19-20; 10:3—31; ch. 15; Rosner, 2016).

7. Union with God's Son

Being "in Christ" is arguably Paul's most comprehensive answer to the question of Christian identity: "It is 'in Christ' that Christians understand their true self to be found" (Bauckham, 143). The goal of Paul's ministry is to "present everyone fully mature *in Christ*" (Col 1:28). Being in Christ is one of his standard ways to describe both himself (e.g., 2 Cor 12:2) and other believers (e.g., Rom 16:7, 11b). And Paul makes no small claims about it: "If anyone is *in Christ*, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Christian identity as God's sons and daughters is based on the fact that believers in Jesus Christ we are *in* God's Son. In Gal. 3:26 (cf. Eph 1:3-5) all of those who have faith in Christ become children of God "in Christ Jesus." "Our true identity, our real identity" is "our identity as adopted children in union with Christ" (Billings, 30). The description in Gal 3:27 of those baptized into Christ being "clothed" with him is reflects the extent to which identity of believers is defined by the person of Jesus: "Their identity is derivative of his" (Macaskill, 196-97).

Finding identity in union with God's Son and the language of sonship raises a major problem of interpretation and translation. Are believers in Christ God's sons or his children? Many modern translations, including the NIV, render the Greek *huios* in Gal 4:7 (and elsewhere) as "child" rather than as "son": "So you are no longer a slave, but God's *child*; and since you are his *child*, God has made you also an heir." While *huios*

in this verse is clearly generic and includes both genders, there are two possible reasons for retaining "son" in translation. The first is the fact that in Bible times it was the right of the eldest son in the family to be the primary heir (cf. Deut. 21:15-17; Num. 27:8; 36:1-12). However, Paul himself does not always insist on using it. In Rom 8:16-17 he discusses Christians being heirs describing believers as God's "children," *tekna*. A second reason for retaining the language of sonship, at least in some contexts, so long as it is understood that the term is gender inclusive, is that it reminds us that we are part of God's family and heirs thanks to the Son of God; we are sons of God precisely because he is the Son of God. Canlis (404) writes: "I am unwilling to drop the gendered term "sonship," as our "sonship" is founded upon Christ's own Sonship."

Union with God's Son implies our participation in the major events of Christ's life (see esp. Col 3:1-4): "Paul argues for a new identity in Christ, one defined historically in relation to Christ's death and resurrection and eschatologically in relation to believers' ultimate and completed destiny" (Keener, 53). If the defining events of Christ's life are his death, resurrection and ascension, it follows for those in Christ that when they were "dead in our transgressions and sins," that "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms *in Christ Jesus*" (Eph. 2:1, 6). In Rom 6:3-4 baptism reinforces the status of people who find their identity in Christ: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

"At the core of Paul's anthropology lies the declaration that in Jesus true humanity is revealed" (Maston, 159). Paul sets the new identity in Christ in contrast to the old identity in Adam, with Adam as the representative of the old humanity. In Rom 5:12-21 and 1 Cor 15:21-22 the archetypal problem of sin introduced into the human race by Adam finds its eschatological resolution through the climactic breakthrough of the resurrection accomplished by Jesus Christ. To be *in Adam* is to be part of the group which finds in Adam its representative and leader, and from him derives its identity and destiny. To be *in Christ* is to be part of the group which finds in Christ its representative and leader and derives its identity and destiny in Christ from what he has brought about for his people.

The notion of being in union with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, draws together several threads of Paul's theology of personal identity. If in Adam we lost our status as God's sons and damaged the image of God, in Christ we are being conformed to and renewed in the image of God's Son (Rom 8:29; Col 3:10). Indeed, it is Christ's purpose "to create *in himself* one new humanity" (Eph 2:15).

8. Known by God as his Child

As social beings, humans are defined by their relationships, by whom they know, and who knows them. In this light, Paul puts a premium on being known by God intimately and personally for personal identity (Gal 4:8-9; cf. 1 Cor 8:3; 13:12; 13:38; Rosner 2017, 113-24), a notion he connects to adoption into God's family; believers are known by God as a father knows his child. Gal 4:8-9 is set in the context of Paul's exposition of adoption in 3:26-4:7 and in Rom 8:28-29 those who are foreknown are conformed to the image of God's Son. On this score, it is significant that in the Gospels and Acts Jesus is himself known by God as God's Son at his baptism ((Mark 1:9-10; cf. Matt. 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22), transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-5; cf. Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36),

and resurrection (Acts 13:32-33; cf. Rom 1:1-4). The believer's true identity is to be known by God as his child, an identity that is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

9. Adoption into God's Family

According to Paul, believers in Christ are sons or children of God, loved by God and given full rights of inheritance as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Gal 4:4-7; cf. Eph. 5:5; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Titus 3:7), brothers and sisters in God's family, with their big brother Jesus as the model to whom they conform, thereby taking on the family likeness. This identity leads to a host of implications for conduct. God's children imitate their heavenly Father by walking in love (Eph 5:1-2), light (Eph 5:8) and wisdom (Eph 5:15), and imitate his Son Jesus Christ by living lives of loving sacrifice and service to others (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:5; 1 Thess 1:6). As brothers and sisters, they are to live in harmony and with care for and support of their spiritual siblings (1 Cor 6:5; Gal 6:1-2; Phil 4:1). And they expect God their Father's loving discipline (1 Cor 4:14-15; cf. Heb 12:7). "Finding our true selves in Christ, we identify with him who loved us, follow his way of self-giving for God and for others, and thus continually find ourselves afresh in him" (Bauckham, 143).

This identity as God's children and the character that goes along with it has a long backstory. It's not as though divine adoption comes out of the blue. If Adam was a rebellious son of God and suffered "death" as a result, Israel proved to be God's wandering son, and David and his dynasty of kings were God's disobedient sons. Only Jesus Christ was God's perfect and well-pleasing Son; and all believers in Christ are sons of God in him. The new identity as God's sons by virtue of being united to God's Son is the true identity of all believers, since being made in the image of God they were made to be God's sons from the very beginning. In Christ, as those known by God as his children, we regain our true selves.

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