

CHAPTER 8

KNOWN IN CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD

What is there to learn about personal identity from the identity of Jesus Christ? With respect to what it means to be a human being, Pontius Pilate proclaimed at Jesus' Trial: "Behold the man!" (John 19:5; RSV), Martin Luther described Jesus as "God's proper man,"¹ and Karl Barth believed that "the existence of this one man [Jesus Christ] concerns every other man as such."² With respect to the question of personal identity, the Apostle Paul could say: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Thus far in this biblical theology of personal identity we have investigated two interrelated biblical concepts: being made in the image of God (chapter 5) and being known by God (chapters 6 and 7). In both cases the notion of being God's son or child proved to be central to human and personal identity: as those made in the image of God we are God's offspring; and as believers in Christ we are known by God as a father knows his child. We now turn to the question of what Jesus Christ has to do with the subject of personal identity. There is in fact much to learn about who we are by looking at who Jesus is. Jesus Christ, as God's unique and beloved Son, brings together the themes of the image of God, being known by God and becoming a child of God.

In our day, when personal autonomy and individual choice are paramount and "being yourself" is a moral imperative, it is countercultural, to say the least, to suggest that you need to find your identity in connection with someone else. And yet that is a big part of what the Bible urges on the subject of personal identity. We find our true identity in connection with Jesus Christ. As Richard Bauckham puts it: "It is 'in Christ' that Christians understand their true self to be found."³

In this chapter we begin to explore the significance of Jesus Christ for a biblical theology of personal identity by looking at Paul's notion of finding your identity "in Christ." Being "in Christ" is arguably Paul's most comprehensive answer to the question of personal identity. 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).

¹ Cited in Hughes, *The True Image*, viii.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 134. You should supply the volume here. You cite Barth again in chapter 9, fn. 58. If that citation is the same source as here, we will need to abbreviate it.

³ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in the Contemporary World: Hermeneutical Ventures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 143. Comparable notions to union in Christ in the Bible include imagery drawn from agricultural, marriage and biological spheres: Jesus as the vine and believers as branches in John 15; Jesus as husband and believers as his wife in Eph. 5:32; and believers as parts of the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12.

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).

“But what *is* man? What does it mean to say, as the Gospel writers say and insist, that Jesus was indeed a human being? What we are remains a very open question. Perhaps some part of the divine purpose in the Incarnation of the Son of Man was and is to help us to a true definition.”

Marilynne Robinson⁴

What does it mean, then, to be “in Christ” and to find your own identity in him? And how does it help in the quest to find a fulfilling sense of self? In order to answer these questions we will look at four things:

1. The identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and the Son of God;
2. The fact that Jesus is himself known by God as his Son;
3. The link between divine adoption and union with God’s Son; and
4. The ways in which being in union with the Son of God gives us our identity.

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Who is Jesus Christ? No person’s identity has been more disputed than that of Jesus Christ.

At a critical turning point of the narratives of the three Synoptic Gospels is a scene at Caesarea Philippi in which Jesus addresses directly the question that has been bubbling along from the beginning of his public ministry, that of his personal identity:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “**Who do people say the Son of Man is?**” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “**Who do you say I am?**” Simon Peter answered, “You are **the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” ... Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (Matt. 16:13-16, 20; cf. Mark 8:27-29; Luke 9:18-20).

The disciples report that people are saying that Jesus is to be identified as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah and one of the prophets. We could add magician, demon-possessed man and insurrectionist to this list from other parts of the gospels. And in our day the number of alternatives for Jesus’ identity has grown even bigger, including Jesus as itinerant cynic philosopher, prophet of the end times, agitator for social change, clever sage or marginal Jew.

The Son of Man

⁴ Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 257.

Before we get to Peter's answer to the question of Jesus' identity it is worth noting that there is a partial answer to Jesus' question in the way he frames it: "Who do people say *the Son of Man* is?" The Son of Man is in fact Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself in all four Gospels. It was cryptic in Jesus' day and its meaning is still debated among scholars today. Does it refer to Jesus' heavenly origin, as its use in Daniel 7:13-14 suggests? Or is it a reference simply to Jesus as a human being, as in the prophet Ezekiel's frequent way of referring to himself. Probably the answer is both, depending on the context.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14).

In Mark 16, for example, Jesus alludes to Daniel 7 when he responds to the question of the High Priest concerning his identity at his trial:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 16:61-62).

In this case Son of Man refers to his heavenly origin. However, in the majority of verses in the gospels the title is a reference to Jesus' humanity, as in Luke 9:58: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

The Greek of the question in Matthew 16:13 repeats the word for "man," suggesting that Jesus as a human being is in fact the point in the context of speaking to his disciples. The NKJV translates the verse: "Who do men [*hoi anthrōpoi*] say that I, the Son of Man [*ton huion tou anthrōpou*], am?" Either way, for our purposes it is significant that Jesus talks about himself in a manner that emphasizes his humanity.

The Son of God

In Matthew 16:16 Peter answers Jesus' question on behalf of the disciples: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." As titles for Jesus, Messiah and Son of God are sometimes synonymous. This seems to be the case here. Son of God, as we will see below, can refer to the coming king in the line of David, who is also the Messiah. Jesus reflects this understanding when he tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah, feeling no need to mention not passing on that he is the Son of God.⁵ In Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20, the parallel passages to Matthew 16, Peter identifies Jesus only as "the Messiah" and "God's Messiah" respectively. And the two

⁵ Cf. Nathaniel in John 1:49: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel"; Martha in John 11:27: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God"; and the purpose statement of John's Gospel in 20:31: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God."

identities are also paired in the High Priest's question to Jesus in Mark 16:61: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? To answer this question we need to know what the Old Testament does with the theme of son (or sons) of God. What is the backstory of the identity of God's son? There are three sons of God in the Old Testament that set the background to the use of the term with reference to Jesus.⁶

Firstly, as we saw in chapter 4, Adam is God's first son (Luke 3:38), so to speak, and all human beings as God's image bearers are also God's offspring. In this connection Jesus is the new and better Adam (Luke 3:22–28; 1 Cor. 15:20–24, 45–49); the last Adam, who begins humanity afresh and sets a new course for the race.

Secondly, following Adam's transgression, by which he and all human beings along with him lose the full status as God's son, God adopts Israel as his son (Exod. 4:22–23; Hos. 11:1; Deut. 14:1; Isa. 43:6; Jer. 3:19). In this connection, the gospels, especially Matthew, portray Jesus as the new and better Israel, recapitulating key events from the nation's history. For example, with reference to the nation Israel's exodus from Egypt, Matthew writes: "So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (Matt. 2:14–15, quoting Hos. 11:1).

Thirdly, the most relevant background to Jesus as the Son of God in Matthew 16 is the teaching that King David and his royal descendants were "sons" of God (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14–16; Pss. 2:6–7, 12; 89:26–29; Isa. 9:6–7; Rom. 1:3–4; 2 Cor. 6:18; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). And Jesus is the new and better Davidic King or Messiah who comes to rule forever in fulfillment of God's covenant with David (Heb. 1:5; Luke 1:32–33; Rev. 22:16). Ultimately, as the ideal Davidic king Jesus is not only the Son of God, but in the words of Isaiah 9:6–7, he is "the mighty God." Jesus, especially in John's Gospel, as the Son of God is also God the Son.

Jesus was known as the Son of God at his death on the cross, ironically, by his executioner: "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:37–38)

As Son of God, then, Jesus is the "new Adam," "true Israel," the ideal "king," and even deity. This is why Jesus as the Son of God is arguably the most comprehensive identity of Jesus revealed to us in the gospels. Its backstory spans biblical theology and salvation history. For this reason, Jesus as the Son of God is the key concept for our own identity in him.

⁶ Angels are also called sons of God (e.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Pss. 29:1; 89:6; NIV: "heavenly beings" or "angels." Even Satan is among the "sons of God" in Job 1:6 and 2:1.

THE SON OF GOD KNOWN BY GOD

It is not only Peter who identifies Jesus as the Son of God in the Gospels. Others recognize him as such, including the angel to Mary (Luke 1:32, 35), Nathaniel (John 1:49), Martha (John 11:27), the unclean spirits (Mark 3:11) and the demons called “legion” (Mark 5:7), and the centurion at Jesus’ crucifixion (Mark 15:37-38). However, most striking of all is the fact that at three key points of his life, Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is confirmed by God. Jesus, like those who trust in him, is known by God:

1. The baptism of Jesus:

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”** (Mark 1:9-10; cf. Matt. 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22).

2. The transfiguration of Jesus:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”** (Matt. 17:1-5; cf. Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

3. The resurrection of Jesus:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was **appointed the Son of God [by God]**⁷ in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:1-4).

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: **‘You are my son; today I have become your father’**” (Acts 13:32-33).

Back in chapter 6 we looked at the Good Shepherd Discourse in John 10 and noted how Jesus compared knowing his sheep and being known by them to knowing his Father and being known by him: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my

⁷ The verb, “to appoint,” is in the passive voice with God as the implied agent of the action.

sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (John 10:14-15a).

In the above texts we see that at three of the most critical junctures in Jesus’ adult life, when he was baptized, transfigured and raised from the dead, he is known by God as his Son. Not only is Jesus Christ’s identity critical for our identity, the manner in which he receives his identity is the same as ours; in both cases we are known by God.

Intriguingly, in 1 Peter 1 both Jesus and believers are also said to be known by God:

To God’s elect ... who have been *chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood” (1 Peter 1:1-2).

He [i.e., Jesus] was *foreknown* before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:20-21; ESV).

While no New Testament text says it explicitly, Jesus being known by God as his Son may well be the grounds by which we are known by God as his sons and daughters. Either way, the related point that our identity as God’s children arises from being in union with God’s Son is affirmed in Scripture.

UNION WITH THE SON OF GOD

Several scholars believe that our identity as God’s sons and daughters is based on the fact that if we trust in Jesus Christ we are *in* God’s Son. John Murray believed that “we cannot think of [divine] adoption apart from union with Christ.”⁸ Henri Blocher contends that, “in the Son we become sons, an act of grace which fulfills and transcends our primeval quasi-sonship.”⁹ Grant Macaskill writes that “in [John] Calvin’s account of adoption ... it is because believers are ingrafted into Christ through faith that they are adopted [into God’s family].”¹⁰ And J. Todd Billings asserts that “our true identity, our real identity” is “our identity as adopted children in union with Christ.”¹¹

“We are actually incorporated into Christ’s own life – that is what union with Christ is. In union with Christ, we receive forgiveness, which enables adoption and new life as adopted children, by the Spirit’s power.”

J. Todd Billings¹²

⁸ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 170.

⁹ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 90. “Our primeval quasi-sonship” is a reference to Adam as the son of God by virtue of being made in the image of God; see chapter 4.

¹⁰ Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.

¹¹ J. Todd Billings, *Union With Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

Two texts in Paul's letters demonstrate that a link exists between union with Christ and the adoption of believers in Christ into God's family. First, in Ephesians 1:3-5 Paul lists a number of spiritual blessings that belong to God's people that are found in Christ, adoption being among them:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

As Trevor Burke explains, “adoption in Ephesians 1:5 is situated within the context of a plethora of spiritual blessings that are ours only in and through God's Son, Jesus Christ.”¹³ In particular, as Peter O'Brien notes, the description of Jesus Christ as “the one whom God loves” refers implicitly to his status as God's Son and indicates that our own “sonship” is due to being found in him:

The term “Beloved” [“the one he loves”] here in v. 6 shows that God's election of believers to be his sons and daughters is intimately related to their being in Christ the Chosen One (cf. v. 5), and that the bounty which he lavishes on them consists in their being caught up into the love which subsists between the Father and the Son.¹⁴

A second text to link adoption to union with Christ is Galatians 3:26-28:

So in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.¹⁵

We have already encountered this passage in chapter 3, noting there with reference to v. 28 how the standard identity markers of race, ethnicity, social status and gender are reduced in importance in light of our new identity of belonging to Christ. Here we notice Paul's elaboration of that new identity in terms of being “in Christ Jesus” and “clothing yourself with Christ” (or putting on Christ; see next section). And for our purposes the thing to notice is that according to v. 26 all of those who have faith in Christ become children of God “in Christ Jesus.”¹⁶

¹³ Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (NSBT 22; Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 124.

¹⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 105.

¹⁵ NIV, with one change: “children” to “sons” in v. 26; *huiioi* in Greek.

¹⁶ There is debate among commentators and translations as to whether v. 26 should be translated: (1) “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith” (cf. NIV, NRSV, NET, NIV, GNB, ESV); or (2) “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (HCSB, NLT, NASB, NKJV). The issue concerns whether the phrase “in Christ Jesus” is governed by “sons of God” or by “faith.” Bruce, *Galatians*, 184, points out Paul usually expresses faith in Christ using an objective genitive (see v. 22). In response, Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 118 cites three texts where an expression similar to “faith in Christ Jesus” appears. However, none of the examples matches Gal. 3:26 perfectly: Col. 1:4 has “your

“Believers in Christ are united with him, participate in him, are incorporated into him, and as he is God’s Son inherently, so in him they become God’s sons and daughters by adoption.”

F. F. Bruce¹⁷

Grant Macaskill draws out the implications of becoming children of God in Christ Jesus and underscores the critical nature of the identity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for our own identity as God’s sons:

The description in Galatians 3:27 of those baptized into Christ being “clothed” with him is reflective of the extent to which the believer’s identity is now defined by the personhood of Jesus. The statement is paired with a negation of other grounds of identity or status (“there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”, 3:38) and with a declaration of unity in Christ (“you are all one in Christ Jesus”). ... The clothing metaphor here, then, is one that is intended to present believers in the identity of Christ as sons of God. It is subordinated to the imagery of adoption, but it is vital to note that the grounds of this is the categorically different sonship of Jesus: believers are baptized into *him*, and clothe themselves with what *he* is as constituent of his own identity. Their identity is derivative of his.¹⁸

The notion of being in union with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, draws together several threads of a biblical 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).

UNION WITH THE SON OF GOD AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

If being known by others is a key to identity, as I have argued throughout this book our relationship with God and being known by him is critical to personal identity. Being in union with the Son of God means that **God knows us in his Son**. Union with Christ also contributes to the Bible’s account of the relational self in explaining how in knowing us God can look on us so favorably and not reject us because of our

faith in Christ”; and 1 Tim. 3:13 and 2 Tim. 3:15 include an article functioning as a relative pronoun (lit., “faith *which is* in Christ Jesus”). The grammar does not decide the issue. On balance, context favors understanding Gal. 3:26 as asserting that believers become sons of God by way of union with Christ Jesus: v. 27a’s reference to being baptized into Christ likely recalls and explains the reference to union with Christ in v. 26 (see explanatory *gar* at the beginning of v. 27).

¹⁷ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: a commentary on the Greek text*, 183–185.

¹⁸ Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament*, 196–197; italics original. Cf. Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (First edition; ed. C. C. Black, M. E. Boring, & J. T. Carroll; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 42. “We only obtain our share in this adoption through the true son, Christ.”

sinfulness.¹⁹ Jesus Christ is God's Son whom he loves and with whom he is well pleased. In Christ we enjoy the same blessed status.

“For [John] Calvin, that little phrase ‘in Christ’ signals an altered identity. Not a religious platitude, this phrase requires a new self-understanding in which the Christian can no longer separate his or her identity from being ‘in Christ’ or, indeed, from those who join together forming Christ’s body. Calvin’s term ‘adoption’ can be seen as shorthand for this pneumatological sphere in which we, *en Christō* [in Christ], are relating to God from the transformed reality of adoptive sonship, able to cry ‘*Abba*’ like the Son. Our cry of ‘*Abba*’ is not sentimental but pneumatological, as ‘the Spirit testifies to our heart respecting the paternal love of God’ (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 8:16). Calvin insists that the self can only be understood in its *relation* to God.”

Julie Canlis²⁰

Union with God's Son implies our participation in the major events of Christ's life. If the defining events of his life are his death, resurrection and ascension, it follows for those in Christ that when we 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). The Christian practice of baptism reinforces our status as people who find our identity in Christ.²¹ Paul, for example, states:

Or do you not know that all of us who were *baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? 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. (Rom. 6:3-4)

It is not that union with the Son of God cancels the significance of our own life events. We do not lose our past stories. We remain individuals in the fullest sense. Life's ups – such as getting married, having children, getting a job, buying a house – along with life's knocks, our family histories, and so on, remain significant for our life stories. But ultimately such don't define us. As Bauckham explains:

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.²²

In chapter 10 we will think further about the significance of our shared memory of Christ's death and resurrection and our hope of rising to new life in him. But before

¹⁹ Theologically, justification by faith and union with Christ are closely related. See Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 388-405.

²⁰ Canlis, “The Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ in Calvin,” 414-15.

²¹ For more on this see chapter 14.

²² Bauckham, *The Bible in the Contemporary World: Hermeneutical Ventures*, 143.

that we need to dig deeper into the Bible's teaching about our new identity as sons of God.

RELEVANT QUESTIONS

1. Jesus Christ answered questions about his own identity by describing himself as the Son of Man, a term that emphasised his own humanity. Is Jesus's humanity important to you? And if so, in what ways?
2. As believers in Christ we are united with him and "caught up" in the love that subsists between the Father and the Son. How does being known by God in Christ expand your concept of who you are?
3. This chapter has presented the idea that while we remain individuals with our own significant stories, ultimately life events do not define us. Our true self can only be found in our union with the Son of God. How do you respond to this idea? How does it help you reorder or re-evaluate the foundations of your personal identity?