

Who Am I?

What the Bible teaches
about Christian Identity

by

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I. Opening Considerations

I. Salvation and Identity

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28–30)

When I was a boy my mother bought us children a “Mr. Potato Head” kit. It consisted of a variety of noses, eyes, ears, lips, arms, hands, legs, feet, and so on. Add a potato from the pantry, stick-in the various appendages, and presto, a hilarious looking Mr. Potato Head; hilarious because everything was out of proportion: massive body, little tooth-pick legs and arms, huge ears, bulbous nose, big lips, and giant eyes. Everything was comically out of balance. Remove Potato Head’s smile and replace it with a frowning visage, and he becomes a monster.

Theological balances

We begin our consideration of identity with a discussion of balance. The above passage, with its “golden chain” of salvation,

as it has been known in the Reformed church, presents each item of the *ordo salutis*, the “order of salvation,” as a link in an unbroken chain. It begins with election/predestination, moves along to justification (faith and repentance unstated but implied given what preceded in Romans 3–5), adoption, sanctification (“conformed to the image of His Son”), glorification, and since glorification, perseverance. At any given moment Scripture may speak of our whole salvation as one of these items, or as the *ordo* as a completed whole. We are those “chosen by God” (1 Peter 2:4), “justified by faith” (Romans 5:1), “adopt(ed) as sons” (Ephesians 1:5), “sanctified by the Spirit” (Romans 15:16), who will endure to the end (Matthew 24:13). We are saved (Ephesians 2:8) and are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The Bible is richly diverse in the ways that it presents salvation. Multiple metaphors addressing multiple human needs calling for various saving responses are employed. Each of these metaphors is a window through which we are able to gain a glimpse of sin (the fundamental need), the cross (the fundamental solution), and faith (the fundamental response).

For example, Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35). Here sin is represented by the yearnings of the soul; Jesus presents Himself as the One who can satisfy our spiritual hunger and quench our spiritual thirst, eating and drinking illustrating coming to Jesus and believing in Him.

Jesus also says “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Darkness represents the ignorance and moral evil of sin. Jesus presents Himself as the One who dispels that ignorance and evil; salvation means following Jesus by walking in His light. Jesus says, “I am the True Vine” (John 15:1). Salvation is represented as branches remaining connected (“abiding”) to the Vine through which they are able to have life and to

bear fruit. Salvation can be represented as rebirth (John 3:iff), as justification (Romans 5:1), as redemption (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7), as propitiation (Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2), as reconciliation with God (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21), as adoption (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:4–5; Ephesians 1:5), as sanctification (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:4), as perseverance (Romans 5:3; Matthew 24:13), and as the event by which salvation is completed, glorification (Romans 8:30). Scripture may employ the language of blood sacrifice, of the law-court, of relationships, of the marketplace, of the battlefield, of athletic competition, and of family relations to make the point. Salvation can be identified as one item in the *ordo salutis*, or as the whole *ordo*.

Imbalances

However, the gospel gets warped when we allow one item to become the exclusive metaphor by which our gospel is defined. So does our self-awareness, our self-concept, our identity. The result: Christian Potato Heads. Repeatedly this has happened in the history of the church. Never has the outcome been good. Here is a standard *ordo*, understanding each item as realized in union with Christ, by whom we are justified, sanctified, glorified, and all the rest.

- Election
- Effectual call (regeneration)
- Faith & Repentance
- Justification
- Adoption
- Sanctification

- Perseverance
- Glorification

At one time or another each of these items has become the whole gospel for a group or a movement. Disproportion inevitably has created a comic counterfeit of the gospel. Yet distorted spiritual truths can never be considered funny. Imbalance ultimately creates a spiritual monster, a frowning and destructive Potato Head, and a warped and harmful identity.

Election

Let's start at the top. What happens when we make the whole gospel equal to election? "You did not choose me but I chose you," John told the disciples (John 15:16). Election is the key, we say. We are saved because God chooses us. "In love He predestined us," says the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 1:4–5; cf. Romans 8:29–30). This is our gospel—we exalt the sovereignty of God, yet say little else. It's all God; faith and repentance, the human response to the gospel, rarely gets mentioned lest we diminish God's glory.

The result of this warp will be a form of fatalism known as hyper-Calvinism. Early Methodist evangelist Lorenzo Dow (1774–1834), meaning to satirize Calvinism, coined this ditty:

You can but you can't;
 You will but you won't;
 You're damned if you do, and
 You're damned if you don't.

The distortion he mocks is not Calvinism but hyper-Calvinism, actually misnamed hyper-*Calvinism* because it's not Calvinism at all. It's fatalism. It's "mono causal fatalism," as it's been called. So-called hyper-Calvinists push the logic of election

beyond the bounds of Scripture, resolving the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in favor of the latter and at the expense of the former. As a consequence they deny that the gospel should be offered indiscriminately to all. Rather, Christ should only be offered to those in whom there were signs that the Holy Spirit was at work. When William Carey (1761–1834), father of the Modern Missionary Movement, first presented his idea of world evangelization to a group of ministers, one of them is reported to have said,

Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.¹

This is a fatalistic denial of human responsibility and an irresponsible failure to use God-appointed means. This error breeds passivity and false security. One misunderstands who one is and what is required in relation to God. Yet some so-called Calvinists have fallen into it by reducing the gospel to election without maintaining the biblical balance of human responsibility.

Regeneration

What happens if the gospel is reduced to being “born again,” that is, to regeneration, or what the Westminster Confession calls the “effectual call”? Regeneration, like election, is crucial. Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:1ff; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Titus 3:5). Yet does regeneration stand on its own? Can the gospel be reduced to this? A few decades ago this was exactly what happened. Billy Graham preached the new birth in his crusades beginning in the late 1940s and even wrote a book entitled, *How to be Born Again* (1977), summarizing his message. Charles Colson penned *Born Again* (1976), an account of his conversion. Jimmy Carter was identified as