

Identity Crisis

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The transition from high school life to college life involves any number of significant changes, changes that many of you are experiencing right now. One of the most challenging can be the sudden shift in one's identity. Up until this point, it has usually been easy to define oneself; we often identify ourselves by the group of friends we spend time with, or by our interests, and of course by the family we come from. But the transition into college renders these particulars largely irrelevant, especially when moving away to school. Most likely, you are now surrounded by people who did not know you when you were younger. You now see very few of the people you grew up with, no one at college knows your family or cares who they are, and your interests are steadily changing as you mature.

If you decide to seek even higher levels of education, you will find that this process will repeat itself. There is an old tradition (that you would be well-advised not to disregard) that you do not obtain all of your degrees from one institution. So each new degree program involves a change of location, all new faces, and typically a new scholarly focus. The same idea applies when leaving college to start a professional career. Each such change can feel as if you are starting a whole new life. Scientists sometimes use the expression "in a former life" to describe these segmented periods in our past. For example, I might say "In a former life I was an explosives chemist" or "I studied infrared spectroscopy in a former life." For many people, the process of re-defining oneself can be quite unsettling, particularly if it happens more than once; but it need not be! The secret lies in how we define ourselves in the first place.

Many years ago, Paul wrote to the early church at Corinth about an identity crisis that some of the members there were struggling with. His advice to them can be found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-30. In these verses, Paul compares the Christian community to a living body. He tells us that as believers we are the body of Christ, and that each one of us is a part of it - but not necessarily the same part! The obvious

lesson seems to be that although each of us has been given different gifts, and while we may serve different roles within the Christian community, we are all necessary. We are all loved and cared for, just as a person most certainly cares for the well-being of each and every part of their own body. We are meant to be different from one another, and we are supposed to fulfill different functions, even as we ultimately work together. We belong to Christ, no matter what body part we might individually represent.

The parallels in Paul's analogy are clear, but I think there is another lesson also. Imagine what would happen if your hand were to identify itself based upon the other hands it shook, or by the gloves it wore, or if your ear formulated its self-image by the voices that spoke to it. Consider a head that defined itself by the hats placed upon it. If the parts of the body were to behave that way, simply walking into another room or changing clothes would be a confusing experience. We run the same risk when we define ourselves primarily based upon our majors or professional activities, or by our circle of friends, or by where we live, or how much money we make. Those things can change often and suddenly, leaving us searching for a new identity.

On the other hand (if you'll pardon the pun), when we consider ourselves first and foremost as belonging to Christ we find that we have a much more certain, and permanent, sense of identity. If we accept God's role as Creator and Ruler of the universe, and our relationship with him through Jesus Christ, then by extension we know **our** place in the universe. Seeing the big picture puts into perspective just how minor certain details really are when it comes to understanding who we are. We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is some specific part. Anything else is just details.

Now I'm not saying that none of those details matter at all. In fact, some of them can actually reinforce our identity as belonging to the body of Christ. Just as God designed the different parts of the body to be as He wished them to be, He designed each one of us to perform different functions in His church and in the world. God gave me a fascination with science and an aptitude for rational thought (as well as a complete lack of any musical ability). That's just how He made me. For you, it is most likely something different. Each one of us belongs to the body of Christ, but maybe you are an eye, or a foot, or an ear so to speak. To the extent that we choose things such as our major or our profession, they may

very well reflect who we are. But they are not what we are. This information simply tells us which part of the body of Christ we might be.

Finally, there is one other aspect of Paul's analogy that I think is worth keeping in mind, and that is that our shortcomings do not separate us from the body of Christ. If your foot got muddy, you wouldn't cut it off - you'd wash it. Likewise, you would not amputate a limb if it grew a wart. And if any really serious conditions were to develop with a part of your body, you would devote serious time and energy to correcting the problem. I believe it is the same way with God and us. We are precious to Him, and our shortcomings do not result in Him casting us off and abandoning us. On the contrary, He cares very much for our well-being and is concerned all the more if we are not in good spiritual health. The fact that we are not perfect should not prevent us from considering ourselves as belonging to the body of Christ.

In closing, take care how you define yourself. If you consider yourself first and foremost as belonging to the body of Christ, no matter which part you might represent, you will find that you are much better able to deal with the constant changes that occur in life - even the really tumultuous ones.