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<i>FOREWORD</i>	4
<i>ARTICLES</i>	
“THIS IS THE COVENANT IN MY BLOOD” THE LORD’S SUPPER, PASSOVER, AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY R. Mark Shipp	5
IN REMEMBRANCE OF JESUS Allan J. McNicol	15
SHALLOWS AND DEPTHS THE RISE OF (POST) MODERN IMAGES OF HUMANITY Michael R. Weed	29
CHURCHES OF CHRIST WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE Everett Ferguson	41
<i>SERMONS</i>	
IDENTITY AND VOCATION Paul Watson	53
THREE THINGS THAT MATTER Jeffrey Peterson	61
<i>BOOK REVIEW</i>	
SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON WOMEN OCCASIONAL ADVICE OR NORM FOR THE AGES? Reviewed by Allan McNicol	69
<i>OBITER DICTA</i>	75
<i>CONTRIBUTORS</i>	79

Identity and Vocation

Commencement Speech for ICS Graduates, Sunday, May 20, 2001

Paul Watson

Tom Selleck, the actor known to some of us as Monica's "significant other" on *Friends* and to the rest of us as Magnum, P.I., has been in Durham for the past few weeks rehearsing at Duke for the Broadway revival of *A Thousand Clowns*. In an interview that appeared in our local newspaper last Sunday, Selleck talked about having spent what little free time he had with students in drama classes, answering their questions and talking about the acting profession. When asked his impressions of the students, Selleck volunteered, "At this age they're consumed with *what* they want to be. I tried to tell them it's important *who* they want to be."¹

Not a bad point, is it? I expect that you have already been asked, repeatedly perhaps, "Well, what are you going to do now? Go on to graduate study? Take a ministry with a church? Something else?" I won't ask you that. I will ask, "*Who* are you, now—and who will you be in the days to come?"

¹ Adrienne M. Johnson, "Class Clowns," *Raleigh (North Carolina) News and Observer*, 13 May 2001, sec. G, p. 1.

Let me suggest that, not only for you graduates but for all of us as Christians, the best answer is threefold. Our individual responses might differ in their particulars, but I trust that we would collectively affirm three complementary, interlocking aspects of our identity as Christians, the first of which is that we are children of God. By God's grace, and out of his overwhelming love for us, he has adopted us into his family.

I had known about the human adoption process for some time, but I experienced it firsthand only about eight weeks ago when our son and daughter-in-law in Dallas adopted an infant son. They had applied long ago, but the call to "come and get your baby" came suddenly, unexpectedly. It just so happened that I was in town and so was able to go with them, along with my sister and brother-in-law, their son and his fiancée, and another couple from their church. What a party we had, there at the hospital! What joy, what hope, what love flowed among us and all around "Baby Luke," as he is now known. Now I can so much better imagine the joy in heaven over our adoption into God's family, and so much more deeply appreciate the peace, the security, that comes from my having been adopted, like "Baby Luke," into a loving family—a family whose father is God and whose older brother is Jesus Christ.

"What difference does this make for my future ministry?" you might be thinking. All the difference in the world, so long as you remember, each day, *who* you are. Your prioritizing of tasks, your anxiety over the "success" of one church program or another, your relationships with others, especially with family members—all will be affected, deeply, by your constant recollection of your relationship with God. Your studying will depend, not on assignments and deadlines, but on your hunger and thirst to know your Father's will. Prayer will be, not a luxury, but a necessity; not a duty, but a delight.

The difference will be felt especially in times of stress and strain; of doubt, opposition, and temptation. In the face of such challenges, Martin Luther would remind himself, “But I have been baptized! I have been baptized.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his German prison cell, felt conflicted about his identity. Was he the “good Christian”—the calm, cheerful, friendly person he appeared to be to others? Or was he the restless, weary, empty person he felt himself to be? He said,

Who am I? This or the other?
 Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
 Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
 And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
 Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

His answer was,

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!²

The second part of our answer to the question, “Who am I?” is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. The old custom of addressing fellow Christians as “Brother Smith” or “Sister Jones”—a custom that I grew up with—implicitly gave witness to the truth that, as Christians, we inevitably live together, in community. My favorite New Testament attestation of that reality—one that combines our adoption by God with our fellowship with one another—is Gal 3:26–28:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.³

This communal dimension of my identity may seem to you to be self-evident, but let me caution you that such is not the case with everyone.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953), 173.

³ Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

Our culture remains captivated by the notion of the autonomous, all-sufficient “Self.” As Kenneth Woodward writes in the latest issue of *Newsweek*, speaking of the existentialist movement of the mid-twentieth century, “The self became the only interesting place to be: ‘Hell,’ Jean-Paul Sartre observed, ‘is other people.’”⁴ And today it is common to hear a person, in explaining his or her non-affiliation with any religious group, say, “I’m spiritual; I’m just not very religious.”

Such a notion, for all its sincerity, is absolutely unbiblical. Nowhere in scripture does God invite his people to live in some sort of splendid isolation. God had Moses lead the people of Israel to Sinai precisely so that God could begin shaping them into a covenant community. Even Elijah, who had quite understandably fled to Horeb for safety and solitude, was sent by God back to his people to continue his ministry among them. The peripatetic apostle Paul regularly departed from, and returned to, the church in Antioch, of which he obviously considered himself a member. Our Lord himself, his singular identity with God notwithstanding, gathered a community around him and not only loved and shaped those disciples but asked for their support as well: “‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,’ he said to them. ‘Stay here and keep watch’” (Mark 14:34).

I say all of this to remind you that your ministry, whatever form it may take, will be done among and with and through your brothers and sisters in Christ. That will not always be pleasant or easy, of course:

To live and love with the saints above—Oh, that will be glory!
But to live below with the saints we know—now that’s another story!

But it is unavoidable and, ultimately, it will enrich and sustain you. For you have not come to this commencement day alone. Your family, your home

⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, “Overcoming Sin,” *Newsweek*, 21 May 2001, 37.

congregation, this academic community, the people with whom you worship and serve God now—all are in a real way a part of who you are. It cannot be otherwise; you should not wish it otherwise. For these imperfect, neglectful, demanding fellow Christians can also be God’s ministering angels to you—as our youth minister, Lee, and his wife, Jean, discovered over the past ten days. They were expecting their first child in June. Friday a week ago, at her regular checkup, Jean was told, “The baby’s heart has stopped beating. He is dead.” None of us could change that hideous reality or adequately assuage their terrible pain. But we could and did reach out to them with calls, cards, food, tears, and prayers. Last Wednesday evening, after the memorial service, Lee gave me a great hug and said, “I just can’t tell you what being a part of this church family means to us right now.”

The third dimension of our identity, I would propose to you, is that of servants—servants of God, of one another, of all the world. It is our vocation, literally—our calling. Jesus’ invitation to Peter and Andrew, to James and John, was not simply to *be* or to *experience* but to *do*: “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). Later, when James and John had placed themselves at the head of the line, so to speak, and the other ten had taken understandable offense, Jesus made it clear to them, and to us, what his calling entailed:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42–45)

You may already know what specific form of ministry your calling will take, or you may not. Whatever the form, its substance must remain the same—that of service. Now in rendering that service you will, in my experience, face two great challenges, both of which are addressed by the apostle Paul in the early chapters of 2 Corinthians. The first great challenge

is that of despair, when our service is not productive or appreciated, when its results are not lasting. As Fred Craddock has reminded us, there are two kinds of preaching to which people will not listen—bad preaching and good preaching. To this danger of despair, Paul responds:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. . . . We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4:1, 8, 9)

The other great challenge to our service is self-glorification—taking personal credit for and pride in whatever good God may accomplish through us. To this danger Paul replies:

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. . . . But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Cor 4:5, 7)

In his recent book *Calling and Character*, Will Willimon cites the example of John Chrysostom—"John the Golden Mouth"—one of the most noted preachers of the early church.

At the conclusion of one his sermons in Constantinople, when the congregation broke into enthusiastic applause, Chrysostom turned on the congregation and mocked them for applauding what they had no intention of taking to heart, derided them as scoundrels unworthy of the gospel, and announced that all applause would hereafter be forbidden in this church. This announcement brought down the house with applause.⁵

Nevertheless, with all its inherent challenges, our service to God, to his people, and to his world must become our identity. Service is not just what we *do*; servants is who we *are*. There can be no greater fulfillment than to be entrusted with such service, and to know that "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). There will be no greater joy than to hear the

⁵ William Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 14.

Master say one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt 25:21).

Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?
Children of God.
Brothers and sisters to all of God's children.
Servants of Jesus Christ.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14).

Contributors

Everett Ferguson is Professor Emeritus of Church History at Abilene Christian University.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Jeffrey Peterson is Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Associate Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Paul Watson is the pulpit minister of the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina.

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology.