

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## *The Identity Crisis in American Culture*

The deep-seated commitment to the pursuit of personal autonomy, the vital center of the Postmodern, Postchristian American culture, has produced several effects. The Millennials, who passionately have bought into this commitment, have no loyalty to institutions. For that reason the local church, even if they are Christians, is not that important to them. Technology has enhanced this pursuit of autonomy, enabling millennials to create and fashion their own digital reality. Recent census data confirm that millennials prefer cohabitation to marriage, at least until they reach age 30. Millennials also find opportunities to work at home more appealing than the normal workplace. Again, the digital revolution and the Internet have made this a viable option for many. But, embracing the pursuit of autonomy as the chief goal of life has also produced dysfunction, disorientation and confusion. Many millennials are experiencing an identity crisis. They struggle with whom they are as autonomous individuals. For the millennial generation, work or vocation, which was the primary identity of the boomer generation, no longer applies. For many millennials, the sexual revolution has caused sexuality to emerge as a defining aspect in solving the identity crisis. The LGBTQIA movement illustrates this phenomenon. But it would be difficult to see this movement as successful in solving the pervasive identity crisis among millennials. In this *Perspective*, I want to focus on two major illustrations of the growing evidence of this identity crisis in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture. I will conclude with the argument that only in Jesus Christ is this identity crisis resolved.

- First, consider the bizarre case of Rachel Dolezal. As a blond, fair-skinned white teenager, Rachel came from a family that adopted four black children. She went on to marry a black man and to attend Howard University (largely a black college), where she earned a degree in black culture. She taught in the Africana Studies department at East Washington University and was named the president of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington state. As her hair and her skin became increasingly darker, Dolezal loudly declared her blackness. At first she said she was part black and then identified herself as black, pure and simple. Her argument was that racial heredity did not constitute identity. “Identity [i]s a subjective, fluid thing: ‘From my truth and in this moment, nothing about being white describes who I am.’” As she was caught in several lies, her white parents, using photographs of their daughter, challenged Dolezal publically. It was obvious to everyone that Dolezal created a new identity for herself—she was black and it did not matter what her parents said, what her birth certificate said and despite her obvious white physical characteristics. Rachel Dolezal evidences this confusion of the Postmodern millennial, who maintains that “I am an autonomous human being and I choose my own identity, regardless of my physical, racial or gender characteristics.

Identity is such a subjective thing and I choose!” For reasons that are not quite clear, Rachel Dolezal chose to be black, even though she was not black. She declared her own identity. The result was that most blacks found her decision to choose this identity offensive to them. Most whites were not only perplexed by her choice, but mocked her choice. In an extreme manner, Rachel Dolezal illustrates the confusion and dysfunction that results from the identity crisis among Postmodern millennials.

- Second, consider the case of Caitlyn Jenner (nee Bruce Jenner.) The cover of the July issue of *Vanity Fair* displayed Caitlyn Jenner (the new transgender identity of 1976 Olympic gold medalist Bruce Jenner). Caitlyn is the new “poster girl” of the transgender movement in western civilization. Setting aside the trauma, emotion and confusion that goes with transgenderism, consider this insightful observation from columnist Kathleen Parker: “. . . seeing Jenner all gussied up like some 1940s Vargas girl (part Madonna, part Kardashian?)—wearing long tresses and corset-inspired lingerie—seems a mockery of her new womanhood, as well as the human dignity her public outing purportedly is intended to inspire.” Even more biting is the observation of journalist and former professor, Elinor Burkett: “Caitlyn Jenner’s idea of a woman: a cleavage-boosting corset, sultry poses, thick mascara and the prospect of regular ‘girls nights’ of banter about hair and makeup.” Burkett also quotes from an interview with Dianne Sawyer, in which Jenner stated that “what he looked forward to most in his transition was the chance to wear nail polish, not for a furtive, fugitive instant, but until it chips off. I want that for Bruce, now Caitlyn, too. But I also want her to remember: Nail polish does not a woman make.” Jenner represents the penchant of the Postmodern autonomous millennial who seeks to write his/her own narrative. Medical technology and pharmaceutical products have enabled Jenner to change his narrative: He is no longer Bruce; she is Caitlyn. Caitlyn Jenner wrote: “I’m so happy after such a long struggle to be living my true self.” President Obama tweeted: “It takes courage to share your story.” Parker and Burkett’s comments indicate the tension and frustration of the concept or idea of what it means to be a woman. Jenner has found his new identity in being a woman. The embracing of the transgender phenomenon by our culture makes such changes in identity much easier and much more acceptable. We will see more of this type of identity change.

The tragedy of these two extreme cases of an identity crisis in American culture should drive us to the solution. The solution is found in Jesus Christ. There are two aspects of our identity in Christ: (1) As humans, we are created in the image of God, which establishes our infinite worth and value as humans. It is the baseline for the value of humanity at every stage in development. That weighty truth establishes one aspect of our identity: We both resemble God (in His communicable attributes—intellect, emotion and will) and we represent Him as dominion stewards of His world. (2) The Bible also makes clear that when we place our faith in Christ’s finished work on Calvary’s cross, we are a “new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our new identity is that we are “in Christ,” a powerful and profound phrase used 240 times in the New Testament. The power of sin and the power of death have been broken (see Romans 6). When we place our faith in Christ, we are declared

righteous by Almighty God (justification): Christ's righteousness has been imputed to our account. Further, we are adopted into God's family, with all the rights and privileges of being a joint heir with Christ (see Galatians 4 and Romans 8). God is now our heavenly Father and we are His children. We await the wondrous family gathering of all the brothers and sisters of God's family in His coming kingdom. Finally, we are being transformed into the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19, Romans 8:29). We now belong to Jesus, who bought us with the price of His shed blood and we are indwelt by His Spirit (1 Corinthian 6:19). Galatians 2:20 perhaps best summarizes our new identity in Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The struggles, tensions and confusion about personal identity that the Rachel Dolezals and Caitlyn Jenners of this world experience are resolved in Jesus Christ. To be "in Christ" is the vital center of the new identity offered by God. As with all things in this broken world, the Gospel is the answer. May Rachel Dolezal and Caitlyn Jenner find their true identity in Jesus.

See *Issues in Perspective* (20 June 2015) for the Parker and Burkett quotes; *The Economist* (20 June 2015), p. 30; and Mindy Belz in *World* (27 June 2015), p. 36.