

How we can reach out in confidence

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)

Our identity matters to us. It is tied up with an understanding of our worth and our status. A name, a vocation, a position in society – all help determine our own self-perception and others’ perception of us.

This sense of identity is one of society’s highest values. No matter what that identity is, we are told to honour it. In current debates and social media, the sense of “I am what I am, and am proud of it, and you need to accept it” appears rife.

In the Global South, we see the same, although this is often expressed most powerfully as a group rather than as an individual. The identity can be tied up in a cultural or religious norm (the “ummah”, the Thai Buddhist norm, or the tribal identity). Often it will be decoupled from a god (or gods) in praxis.

Even within the global church, the elevation of self-worth and self-identity is prevalent in the prosperity gospel preaching, overtly or subtly.

Tim Keller, in his Redeemer blog, compares our situation with the early church where he states *“the early church was seen as too exclusive and a threat to social order because it would not honour all deities; today Christians are again being seen exclusive and a threat to the social order because we will not honour all identities.”*¹

How many of us have felt this or something like it during our lives and ministry? Whilst the specifics differ contextually, the general point appears as true in China and India as in Nigeria and the UK. If you do not honour us, you cannot speak to us. To honour us, you must accept our identity.

In the face of this, how do we react? Do we remain silent and pull back in the face of criticism from those around us telling us we do not conform? In the Western context, do we accept the post-modernism that attempts to decouple truth from individual perception?

1 Peter 2 gives a clear Scriptural understanding of who we are and what we are to do.

We have been given an identity.

We are set apart. We are a race, a nation, a people, a royal priesthood, a possession. It is our true identity. In the midst of pressures to conform, we must remind ourselves of our God-given state as “living stones”.

¹ https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/why_does_anyone_become_a_christian

How much do we remind ourselves of this identity, and live in the light of it?

How much is our worth and value derived from our identity in Christ?

We have been given a direct relationship

We are a royal priesthood. God originally called the Israelites out of Egypt to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6), but this was dependent upon obedience and keeping the covenant. The Levite priestly institution was necessary as the sin of the people had not yet been finally dealt with.

As God has declared us righteous in Christ through his blood, so we have become the royal priesthood – each believer with the same privilege. We are God’s own possession, bought with Christ’s sacrifice, belonging to him.

This is radical. It is what makes following Christ distinctive. It is attractive. Each person has the ability to come equally before the Father, whether they are the lowest class in India, the high-class business person in Ghana, or the seemingly anonymous worker in London.

How much do we cherish this relationship so that we genuinely share it with those who ask?

Are we able to describe how we’ve moved from darkness into his marvellous light?

How can we make it context specific to those around us? (see Steve’s piece last month exploring “by all means”)

We have been given a task

There is a “so that” in verse 9. He called us, chose us and set us apart... so that... we would declare the praises and proclaim the excellencies of him who called us.

There’s a message that goes out. That message glorifies the One who called us (see the first question from the shorter Westminster catechism). It witnesses to him, and declares his goodness.

I used to think of this verse as a call to worship, focused most obviously in our songs and prayers in our church community.

Increasingly, looking at the translation “proclaim the excellencies”, I can see a focus on pointing the watching world towards the glorious God we serve. We are declaring and proclaiming the excellencies of God to someone other than God. Just as Israel was originally intended to be a kingdom of priests and a witness to the surrounding nations, so we are now his witnesses to those around us.

This is for every single follower of Christ. There is no distinction as in Israel’s day of a Levitical priesthood. Instead, all of us are to proclaim the excellencies of the one who called us.

How are we doing this as we live our lives where God has called us?

We pray you will be encouraged in your identity as His possession, set apart for Him. Let’s hold on to that in all circumstances. Let us use it to spur us on in telling others of him, his incredible work, and the opportunity to move from darkness into his wonderful light.