

WHO AM I?

Some years ago, I had quite an adventure. It took me most of a day. The story began when Laura and Rachel signed up for the Bob Jones track team. As with any such endeavor, there was considerable paperwork involved, and one of the papers that had to be provided was a copy of their birth certificate. They were still in middle school, not yet old enough to hold a learner's permit or a driver's license, so a birth certificate was the best piece of identification that they had. Now, Rachel and Laura because they were born in China and are naturalized citizens of the US, both have State of Alabama birth certificates, but their birth certificate looks different from yours or mine.

Their birth certificate clearly says, that it is an "amended certificate of foreign birth". Not really noticing the difference or thinking that it would be a problem, I went ahead and turned it in. About a week later I got a call from the middle school. There was a problem with their birth certificates. On the second line, in small print it says, "Not valid unless section 2 attached." Where was section 2? We needed to find that and turn it in as well.

At the time Barbara was still working, so she came home from work, and she looked through the folder where we keep those papers. Where was section 2? She couldn't find any additional papers. So, the next day I went to the health department. I explained the problem to the clerk at the window. She had me fill out forms and pay a fee. Then I sat down to wait for the fax from Montgomery. A few minutes later Montgomery faxed the same, one-page document that I already had. So, I went back up to the clerk and explained that this wasn't going to do- that I needed section 2. So, she called Montgomery to ask them about it, but of course, by this time they had already gone to lunch, so I had to sit down and wait. As soon as they came back from lunch, she gave them a call again. After waiting for about 30 more minutes, Montgomery returned the call, and the mystery was solved.

As I said before- and I don't know why they did it this way-, the fine print says, "Not valid unless section 2 attached." When you see the word "attached" what you expect is that there is another piece of paper that they're going to connect to it, right? That suggests you should look for a second document, which we had done. But it turns out that section 2 is right there at the bottom of the same page. You know- it was literally, right in front of our noses and we missed it. I had a good laugh with the woman at the school when I went over there and showed her that. She didn't think it was so funny, but I did!

In any case, in our society we use documents to identify ourselves to others- birth certificates, drivers licenses, passports, etc. They are important because they allow us to do things. We can't conduct any business, really without them. Just yesterday I went down to Birmingham, because Rachel is moving from one apartment to another. I rented a U- Haul. I had to take a picture of my driver's license. You can't really do any business without them. Those documents tell others that we are who we say we are. The question is, are we really who we say we are?

There are many ways to answer the question, “Who Am I?” Take me for example. I could tell you who I am by giving you, my name. I am Tom Lewis, and I’ve got pieces of paper that say that. I might answer the question by telling you about my family. I am the son of the late Dr. T. K. Lewis, Jr. and the late Rhea Ward Lewis. I am the brother of Ms. Cecile Hydrick, Dr. Cynthia Lewis- Younger, and Mrs. Linda Faulk. I am the Husband of Barbara Deloney Lewis, and the Father of Rachel and Laura Lewis.

Also, I might answer the question by telling you from whence I come. I am from Madison, Alabama. I am originally from Decatur, Alabama. I am an Alabamian, I am a Southerner, I am a citizen of the United States Citizen of America. All of those are ways of telling you who I am. Another way I could answer that question is telling you what I do. I’m a pastor. I pastor Copeland Presbyterian Church. I’m a member of the North Alabama Presbytery. Or I might answer it by telling you about my Education. I am a graduate of Auburn University, a graduate of the University of Alabama, Huntsville, and a graduate of Columbia Theological Seminary. In fact, there are a number of ways I can answer the question of who I am.

Now Paul’s letter to the Romans is just that- letter. In Seminary we learned a number of methods of analyzing scripture. One of those methods is called form criticism. Form criticism focuses on the form or type of literature that is in front of you. Literature conforms to certain norms. For example, if I say the words “Once Upon a Time,” my guess is you expect to hear a fairy tale. That’s because fairy tales start with the form, once upon a time. If you send me a letter, I expect the opening line of that letter to read “Dear Tom” or “Dear Mr. Lewis.” That’s because that’s how we were taught to write letters. That’s the form that letters take.

In the ancient World, it was a bit more complicated than that. The bible is composed of a number of forms of literature, one of which is letters. When one was reading a letter, one expected to find an extended description of the Author of the letter, which is what we saw in the introduction to Paul’s letter. He told you a lot about who he was. That’s exactly what Paul gives us. The letter begins, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

Paul really introduces three different people in that letter. He introduces himself, and he says who he is. He also says who his master is. His master is Jesus Christ. That’s important in the Ancient World. He also tells his readers who they are- those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ- to be servants of Christ, just like he is.

Some years ago, now, I read a book called The Disciple-Making Church. The premise of the book was that a person’s spiritual journey really could be reduced to a

series of six questions. The First question was, “Who is Your Lord?” The second was, “Who are You?” In this introduction, Paul gives us both, and also tells the reader who they are.

Paul identifies himself to the Roman church as a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle. His basic identity comes from here. This is who he is. The actual word used here is “slave”. In the Roman World a slave is an individual whose identity and status are embedded completely in the identity and honor of their master. Slavery has a terrible connotation in our world. In the Ancient world, while still bad, things are not quite so “clear cut”. The slave of a wealthy and powerful person in the ancient world, may have a higher status in that society than a poor free person. In fact, if you insult a person’s slave, you’re insulting that person. If you do injury to a person’s slave, you’re doing injury to that person. That’s the way it was perceived, not just by society, but by the courts. In fact, some slaves were well-educated and performed important society functions. For example, household stewards and the tutors for wealthy children were often slaves.

So how do we think about ourselves when we think about our relationship to Jesus Christ? Do we think of ourselves as servants? In our world that has a bad connotation. It seems to imply that somehow, we’re “less than” if we’re serving others rather than taking care of number one. But the bible doesn’t really think so. Jesus Christ says the greatest among you must be a servant. So, one way that Paul describes himself is as a servant- a slave to Christ.

Paul also describes himself by means of his calling. He says that through Christ he has received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles. Paul is called by Jesus to perform a certain task- the task of spreading the faith. There’s an important theological point here. Being a Christian is as much an occupation as it is a commitment to a belief. Integral to our faith is the doctrine of calling. Now it should be said that not all of us are called to be apostles, nor are all of us called to preach. However, all of us who take the name of Christ are called to some ministry of one form or another. If you were asked what your calling is, how would you answer? Could you tell someone who you are, by telling them about your calling? Have you stopped to ask yourself that question?

But there is another dimension to this introduction. By telling us that he is a servant of Jesus Christ, Paul is telling us that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Master. By calling us those who are called by Jesus Christ, he’s telling us that is who we are as well.

He proceeds to tell us who Jesus really is: descended from David according to the flesh, declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead. In effect Paul is saying, “I’m not the important one here. I’m not the one you really need to know. Let me instead tell you about my master. Let me tell you about Jesus Christ.”

Next week we're going to gather around a tree. We are going to open presents, empty stockings, eat a bunch of junk food, and maybe have a really big meal. How much time will we spend remembering our master? How much time are we going to spend telling the story to each other? After the birth of that child in the manger, how will we identify ourselves? Who am I? Who are you? Who is your Lord?