**IDENTITY AS SENT ONES:**

**PERSONALLY AND IN COMMUNITY**

 Abraham McIlhenny, Andrew Christopher, Teddy Hembekides

*“Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’” Jn 20:21 (NIV)*

**Why Do We Need to Have an Identity as Sent Ones?**

In the gospels, one part of Jesus’ discipleship training was the sending of his disciples into Israel so that He would be known through them. The word “sent” is always in the context of God the Father or Jesus sending believers for the work of redemption in a fallen world. In fact the word “mission” comes from the Latin “missio” meaning “send.” (Oxford) This gives us assurance that we are on mission by God’s command and authority. So much so that Jesus said accepting his “sent ones” was the the same as accepting Him. There are many examples. Jesus told Simon and Andrew, “*‘Come, follow me,’” Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people’*” (Mt 4:19). In another example Jesus tells the disciples, “*Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field*” (Mt 9:38). Mark 6:7 says, “*Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.*” In these verses it is clear that sending is for the purpose of God’s soul-saving work. So identity as a “sent one” comes in the context of mission or being sent out or having God’s authority to be agents in the work of salvation.

**Who Sends Us and Why?**

**Our Sender and Command-Giver is Jesus Christ**

All authority on heaven and earth has been given to Jesus (Mt 28:18) because he has ransomed us (Mk 10:45) by his perfect life (1Pe 1:19) with his blood (Eph 1:7) and still lives (Mt 28:6) and intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). When Jesus prayed the High Priestly prayer he stated, “*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world*” (Jn 17:18). After his resurrection Jesus said, “*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*” (Jn 20:21). He even said, “*Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me*” (Jn 13:20). This shows that as “sent ones” Jesus wants God to be known through the ones he sends. In a sense Jesus is stating that him sending us is an echo of the Father sending him.

**Motive and Purpose of Being Sent**

Other scriptures tell us more about the motive, purpose and outcomes of being sent. In his testimony to King Agrippa the apostle Paul explained that the reason Jesus had sent him to both the unbelieving Jews and the non-believing Gentiles was “*to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me*” (Ac 26:18). Even though God is the most valuable being in the universe and Jesus is God, people are blinded, that is to say more attracted by basic worldly, fleshly, sensual, and material things than by God. Even God’s gifts like career, friends and family can cause a dangerous blur to the ultimate value of God himself. The Bible tells us that we live in an evil age (Ga 1:14) that lies to us, and is in Satan’s grip (1Jn 5:19). Satan blinds the minds of non-believers (2Co 4:4) and leads the whole world astray (Rev 12:9). Even when we work hard in sowing God’s word and opening people’s hearts to God, Satan can easily and often take it away (Mk 4:15), and our best efforts can be resisted, ignored, belittled or rejected. Jesus knew that he was coming to a world that has rebelled against God and rejects him (Jn 1:9; Mk 8:31). So he did not sent his disciples out with naive idealism but with discernment as “*sheep among wolves*” (Mt 10:16). Though Jesus sends us out with all his authority and amazing help and rescue, God’s mission to a lost world always means being equipped with enough faith and the grace to suffer at the same time (Php 1:29). The privilege of being sent by God will mean participating in his remaining sufferings (1Pe 4:13), and filling up our lives with the efforts, difficulties, hardships, sacrifices and adversity to make Jesus known to a world that does not want to know God (Col 1:24).

While doing God’s work as “sent ones” we often need to remember something. The good news is that God has sent his Son into the world. However, sometimes God’s gifting and success in ministry can distil pride into our sinful hearts and result in “the idolatry of ministry.” This is revealed in our depression when we don’t appear to produce any fruit despite the efforts we are making. In these times we realign our lives by reminding ourselves that God sending his Son is primary and God sending us is secondary. We are happy not because of our success or that we have been given spiritual authority but because our names are written in heaven (Lk 10:20). We are part of the great army of witnesses that God has saved and sent, but the sending of Jesus into the world is always pre-eminent, the greatest story, the best news. The kind of work we do has been repeated in the history of faith and Christianity but what Jesus has done can never be repeated. It is a singular event worthy of all glory and praise.

**Who We Are Personally and in Community**

**In Relation to God and Christ**

In relation to God, we are his children. When we receive Jesus and believe in his name, God gives us the right to become children of God. We are children of God not born of natural descent, nor human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. No one can call themselves a child of God just because they were born into a Christian family, or because of a ceremony they participated in, or because their spouse is a Christian. It is not by one’s human effort, but only by accepting what Jesus already did on the cross, paying the penalty for our sins.

We are all God’s creation, but we are not all God’s children from birth as some assume. Rather we are predestined for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with God’s pleasure and will (Eph 1:5). Through Jesus, we are adopted as God’s children.

God calls us his children not to be spoiled and enjoy God’s blessings selfishly. That is not a blessed life at all. A selfish life is a cursed life. A blessed life is to be a blessing. God calls us to be a source of blessing to others. In light of 1 Peter 2:9, when we are saved, we become a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Because of this wonderful calling and choosing, God blesses us to be his co-workers. 1 Corinthians 3:9 says, “*For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building*.”

**In Relation to God’s People**

In relation to God’s people we are brothers and sisters of one Father God and one Lord Jesus Christ. In John 20:17 the Risen Jesus stressed this identity when he told his disciples, “*Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*”

We are also friends of Jesus and friends of one another. Jesus addressed his disciples as his friends in John 15:13-14: “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command*.” Apostle Paul personally acknowledged his friends in the gospel work, including “his dear friend” Epenetus – the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia, – his “dear friend in the Lord,” and Urbanus, his “co-worker in Christ” (Ro 16:5,8-9). Friends are formed, as we share the same calling to spread the gospel and to encourage one another in this work.

We can do this in many ways. The example Jesus showed us is to humbly serve one another in love. Jesus set the example of humble serving when he washed his disciples’ feet in the Upper Room before his arrest and crucifixion. John 13:14-15 says, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” This means that a forgiving attitude towards other believers doing the same work is essential in inspiring and motivating one another. In this world we can get distracted so like the early Christians we need reminders like apostle Paul who exhorted the Galatian Christians not to use their freedom to indulge the flesh, but rather to serve one another humbly in love (Ga 5:13).

**In Relation to the World**

In regard to our relation to the world, our clear identity is that of servants of God and of Jesus Christ. Yet in being sent out, we will and must encounter, serve and relate to all other kinds of human beings who may be far from God and lost to Him. This can be a guelling two handed process. Staying close and personal with our God, yet reaching out to the fallen world. In his letter to the Romans, Paul first and foremost identified himself as a “servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Ro 1:1). As servants of God, we belong to Him forever and are servants of his will. This gives us identity and relationships with all of the sons and daughters of God. As Paul states we are set apart with a special function. Though “servant” is a lowly title it has the highest honor so we need to be careful not to think we are deserving of such a place of God’s favor. We can stay humble when we think about the value of our calling and identity rather than having earned anything. As a servant of God, Paul commended himself in this way, “in great endurance, in troubles, hardships and distresses.” (2Co 6:4) As Jesus stated, we should never have an “entitlement” mentality, as though we are deserving of self-glorifying praise or recognition. Rather, Jesus’ advice in Luke 17:10 is that when we have done everything we were told to do, we should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”

When we have a right and humble attitude of unworthy servants, we are ready to identify ourselves as Christ’s ambassadors through whom God is making his appeal for people in a lost world to be reconciled to God (2Co 5:20). We have a great privilege to be chosen to serve God’s great task, for through Christ we receive grace and apostleship to call unbelievers to the obedience that comes from faith for Jesus’ name’s sake (Ro 1:5). We are messengers, heralds of the king, sent to prepare the way for the Lord (Lk 9:52).

**Benefits and Dangers Regarding Identity**

**Benefits of Clear Identity**

The greatest privilege of being “sent ones” is that Jesus’ name can be known through imperfect people like us. As sent ones from Jesus we can love unworthy people, see ruined lives and relationships restored, and give ultimate hope to a hopeless world of sin and injustice. God may use us to perform miracles and even see sick people's lives restored. After many years of being part of the problem and sin of the world, we, with God and Jesus’ grace, become part of the solution. We begin to experience a righteous and redeemed kind of life, caring for people in ways we never cared about before. This is all due to the grace of God. In our past sinful lives we groaned under the weight of sin in our lives and were no better than any person in this cursed world. However being sent by God means a life of reversing the curse and bringing the lost, sinful and broken to God. Abraham’s life seemed to be another tragic story but when he followed God’s calling in faith his life became one big blessing (Ge 12:2). His life gave the impact and influence of faith on many future generations. Likewise, after receiving Jesus’ life saving rescue we are to go out in the world and reverse other people’s sinful and tragic situations by faith. Our presence on earth is no longer just another noxious element of this cursed world. Instead we experience God’s healing and growth in the image of God from one degree of glory to another (2Co 3:18). We become agents of God’s blessing. This blessing comes when any person turns from their wicked ways to faith in Jesus Christ (Ac 3:26). Jesus sent his disciples out so that “people might repent” (Mk 6:12). Turning away from sin and other gods to Jesus brings God’s favor and blessing. They can have fellowship with God and experience God working in their lives for much good. To do this kind of work and bring blessing as Jesus’ “sent ones” we ourselves need to keep this new grace and identity in Christ intact.

As “sent ones” of Jesus we are his witnesses. Jesus said, “*You will be my witnesses*” (Ac 1:8). For fallen human beings real witnesses important. They say what is true, and confirm what is real and valuable. So “sent ones” are valuable because they are like a light, or corrective glasses, through which other people can begin to see what is real and valuable. In our society there is pressure to not share or speak our faith, because our society is undergoing secularization. Sent ones overcome the prevailing darkness because they know that they are not their own, they were bought with a price (1Co 6:19). Sent ones know that “*to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Php 1:21), so God helps them to overcome pressure to be quiet with words given by the Spirit of God (Mt 10:20). Sent ones may be misunderstood, hated on, betrayed, harshly criticized, or even killed (Mt 10:21-13), but they receive salvation at the end of it all, and are blessed and valued by God more than many sparrows (Mt 10:31).

**Dangers in Identity**

One real danger in serving God is that our ministry work eventually takes first place over our relationship with Jesus himself. When we are doing well in ministry we might begin to cherish our ministry successes more than the encouragement we get day by day in a relationship with Jesus. As stated before, when our attention turned away from God himself, we become depressed in ministry when our success is threatened or no success is visible. Sometimes our personal development and growth in the Lord is less than spectacular and oh so slow but turning away from our personal relationship with Jesus is a mistake because deeper joy in life and more lasting satisfaction in our situations are possible only in Jesus. (Php 4:11-13) Paul lamented that his own people had a great zeal for God, but that zeal was not based on knowledge (Ro 10:2) –– meaning that their knowledge was not based on the saving grace of the Messiah but their own works. In 2 Timothy 1:9 he also said, “*He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, ...*” Though it is natural for any disciple to take satisfaction in the organization or mission they are serving, that satisfaction should never take the place of Jesus and his grace. Even if we lost everything we had worked for, we will never lose our identity as a chosen and sent one of Christ.

**How We Can Keep Our Identity As “Sent Ones” of Jesus**

**And Run With Perseverance With God’s Plan and Purpose in Our Lives**

In the Old Testament when spies were sent out to gather information about the land they would one day conquer, they were successful because they maintained their focus on their mission, or the reason for which they were sent. Keeping their identity helped them to gather information that God was sending them to encourage them in taking the land, and even saving a wayward Gentile, Rahab. In contrast, other examples in the Bible show us the results of compromising our mission. Lot was overcome by enticements and pleasure and a New Testament believer named Demas abandoned his identity because he loved the world too much (2Ti 2:4). Distractions from our sent identity are many. One identity building scripture for our UBF ministry since 1991, and for Christians in general, comes from 1 Peter 2. Peter was responsible as a shepherd for the diaspora Christians who were scattered all over Asia Minor because of persecution. In that situation Peter described the core elements of our identity even in a troubled situation. 1 Peter 2:9 says, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*.” This verse gives us corporate and individual identity based on several things. Our identity as sent ones comes not from our ethnicity, economic profile or something else but simply from the fact that we are chosen. To communicate in our ministry we often have to talk about Korean missionaries versus native shepherds as if there were korean missionary Christians and non-Korean native Christians. This verse tells us that we have been chosen not on the basis of belonging to any group. Our identity is that we are chosen of God and not even because we deserved it. The fact is that we do not even know why we were chosen, only God knows. It’s grace. It’s mercy. In love God predestined it (Eph 1:4-5). We stand in awe of God who chose us, and then undertake to be faithful to it from first to last (Ro 1:17). Another element of our identity is that we are “God’s special possession.” This means that we belong to God because “*we were bought with a price*” (1Co 6:20). Deuteronomy 32:9 says, “*For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.*” Though God owns all people there is something special about belonging to God, and living for him in mission. We are also a “holy nation.” God is holy and born again people become holy like God. It is our new ethnicity. We are not merely a person in the world anymore. We live for God and our lives are set apart for Him. We share in his character, work and joys. Finally we are a “royal priesthood.” Our identity in God was created by one person giving us immediate access to God. 1 Timothy 2:5 says, “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.*” With this new access to God we don’t anymore passively observe a world whose systems are failing, but we now minister for a lost world in the presence of God. These days human life and purpose is largely made through self-concept and self-identity, but our Christian identity is that we are saved and sent by God.

In conclusion, our identity as “sent ones” are important to our Christian identity, our discipleship and our service to God. Just as Jesus was sent into the world to do his Father’s will, so he sends us into the world to do His will. Jesus sends us to spread his salvation to the ends of the earth, to share forgiveness, hope and joy with all people. This we do by sharing the gospel and teaching his precious words. As a visible person, Jesus is no longer in the world, but we are. As friends with other Christians in this mutual calling we can encourage each other with forgiveness and deeds of love. When we prize Jesus, more than any recognition for the work we do, we can stay humble and persevere together in ministry as sent ones to a lost world needing redemption and reconciliation with God.