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Life In Christ: Who's In Your Wallet???

by David Patten

In America, we talk a lot about our God-given rights: The right to practice our faith, the right to a presumption of innocence in court, and the right to free speech. Our inalienable rights, we are told, include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But there is another right, a right we also receive from God when we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior, that in some ways is the foundation for every other right that we enjoy. It is the right to be defined by who we are in Christ.

The Bible tells us that believers are born again (John 3:3 and I Peter 1:23), and a new creation (2nd Corinthians 5:17).

I've been thinking a lot about the importance of one's identity, ever since Mary Craig received the following word just prior to Betty and I going to South Africa on an MCM mission trip.

“You will go to South Africa. You will make notes of what you see. You will inquire into the minds of the people. I will show you how far they are from the Living God. Nevertheless, Mine are in the land. Fight for them, for I am bringing them out. I will be their God and they will be My people. Write what you see and define them, define them. Take what you define, their identity, and compare it with the identity of Jesus Christ, and then cancel what is not the identity in Jesus Christ, that Mine will be identified in Christ. Give them identification in Christ. And now, I stand in my office as an apostle of Jesus Christ to the nations and as an apostle of the last judgment. I release the anointing of the Holy Spirit for South Africa, in Jesus' Name. I release the burden of the LORD for South Africa, in Jesus' Name. And I will set a guard over your mouth. In Jesus' Name.”

Perhaps the best way to understand the identity of South Africans, in contrast to identity in Jesus Christ, is to understand why South Africa as we know it today is there in the first place. I refer not to the geologic and tectonic forces that God used to create the continent of Africa. Rather, I'm talking about what drew Europeans and their Western civilization to this rather out-of-the-way spot.



Europeans began settling in what is now Cape Town, near the tip of South Africa, in the late 16th century. They did so because the old spice route – through the Mediterranean, then through Egypt, south through the Saudi Arabian peninsula, and then east to India – was suddenly cut off by the rise of Muhammadans who would no longer allow European caravans to pass through. When access through the Mediterranean to the rich spice and silk trade were cut off, it became imperative to find a new route. The new path involved navigating the Cape of Africa before heading east. Because Cape Town was an approximate mid-point in the journey, and a fertile staging area to replenish ships and crews, the area around Cape Hope was soon a waypoint for the Dutch, English, French, and Spanish, and people from many other nations.

The Dutch East India Company established the first resupply base in 1652. It would grow to become South Africa's second largest city, Cape Town. In 1687, members of the French protestant reformed church, the Huguenots, who fled France to escape to the Netherlands, joined the Dutch colony. In fact, the land was called the Cape of Storms until the spice route shifted. After that, it was called the Cape of Good Hope because it was a doorway to the prosperous spice routes.

The Huguenots were fortunate. They came to Cape Town voluntarily. But tens of thousands of souls from Indonesia, Madagascar, and India had no choice. The Dutch captured them and brought them to Cape Town as slaves. The idea of Europeans importing slaves *into* Africa may seem preposterous. But that is what happened.

But if it was the riches of the spice trade that lured colonists to South Africa, it was another form of wealth that would set South Africa on an irreversible course that would lead first to Apartheid, then to Nelson Mandela, and then to reconciliation and the nation's current state of affairs. That "other form" of wealth was first diamonds, and then gold.

All That Glitters ...

Rich deposits of first diamonds and then gold were discovered in South Africa in the mid-19th century. Like the slavery that preceded it, those finds provided another opportunity to witness what happens when people choose to base their identity on material, rather than spiritual, riches.

Christ warned about this egregious error in Matthew 6:19. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where these break through and steal," He said. And Luke 12:15: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."



What happened, when diamonds were discovered in 1867 and gold in 1884, was war. The British invaded first the Cape area and then pushed north to seize the rich gold deposits that run through Johannesburg. Their enemies were the Boers -- the ancestors of the Dutch, French, and Germans who had originally settled the area nearly 200 years before.

One of the curious aspects about identity as regards sub-Saharan Africans is that not all of them are dark skinned. To put it another way, there are white Africans and black Africans. We never think of Africans as being white. From the outside looking in, all so-called "black people" trace their origins to Africa. How can you be white and be an African?

The answer is deceptively simple, and once again it shows the great power God has given people to proclaim who they are. From the inside looking out, if your forefathers who came from the Netherlands have lived in Africa for two centuries, are you Dutch or are you African? After so many generations, the Boers considered themselves Africans of Dutch descent. They called themselves "white Africans." That was their identity then, and so-called "Afrikaners" today will still describe themselves as "white Africans."

As Africans, they were determined to defend their homeland from the British invaders. Thousands died on each side. Lest this seem academic to our current era, consider that many trace the advent of guerilla tactics and terrorism to the Boers, who resorted to desperate measures to defend their nation against the global superpower of their era. The British proved too powerful, however, and the Boers were pushed north of Johannesburg, to Pretoria. That left the rich gold deposits to the British.



Anyone who questions the contemporary relevance of these events need only ride an elevator up to the scenic observation deck of the Carlton Centre 50 stories high -- the highest building in Africa. From here, you can gaze out to where the gold mining continues to burrow deeper and deeper into the earth. It looks like a giant tiger has scratched great swathes from the hide of an otherwise lush landscape. Anywhere there was gold, there is now a small barren mountain of dirt and rock that has been cast out of the mines below.

All along the horizon, you see what appear to be dams. They are not dams, however, they are catchment basins that tower several stories high. They contain the highly toxic acids and chemicals that are used today to separate the gold from the rock. So all around Johannesburg are man-made lakes of highly poisonous fluids. There already have been reports of leaks affecting water supplies; the government denies there is anything to be worried about, of course. The bottom line: The manic compulsion to follow the gold deeper and deeper into the earth has left South Africa teetering on the verge of a major ecological catastrophe. Gazing out at the dam-like structures on the horizon, one cannot help but shake ones head at the thought that this is what human stewardship of the earth has come to.

Today, those mines run so deep that the mines have to be cooled by an elaborate system that pumps near-freezing liquid miles below the ground, because the tunnels are so far into the ground that the vast pressures create temperatures of over 150 degrees. The deepest mine in the world is the Tautona mine west of Johannesburg. It jabs like a spear some two-and-a-half miles into the earth's crust. ... All in search of gold.

It was to protect all of this wealth that the system of Apartheid was created. After all, the white Africans are only about 10 percent of the population. Eighty percent of the population is black Africans. The other 10 percent are known as "colored people." The only way such a small minority could rule over such a large majority was through constant oppression, intimidation, and when necessary, violence.

By the way, one of the behaviors that really perturb South Africans is when America tourists say something like, "Apartheid was like Jim Crow-era bigotry against blacks in the U.S." This makes them roll their eyes. They contend that Apartheid was much worse overall than the so-called separate-but-equal system that followed the emancipation of black Americans during the Civil War. And they probably have a point. While both communities suffered withering injustice, black Africans were condemned to nearly starve in rural areas because they were forbidden by law to move into the cities where there were jobs. For a black South African to even speak to an Afrikaner, unless they knew them or were invited to do so, could be considered a serious affront. And a white South African plantation owner could literally get away with murder; unmarked, mass graves were found on several plantations there after Apartheid ended. This in part accounts for the fact that, despite the general impression that peace and reconciliation marked the end of the Apartheid era, some 3,000 white African farmers were murdered in the backlash that followed the end of that terrible oppression.

During our MCM presentation after the trip, Betty and I explained that the phrase "colored people," which is very offensive in the United States, is not a pejorative at all in South Africa. Rather, the term "colored" is simply the most pragmatic descriptor for a non-white person who is not a member of an African tribe. Both the tribes, and the self-assigned category of "colored," are excellent examples of how people in South Africa, or anywhere, decide and proclaim who they are. The consequences that flow from that choice can be quite profound.

Tribes are everything in Africa. For centuries before white men ever stepped foot on the continent, the people of Africa divided themselves into tribes. And as is the case with all tribal people, the connection to the group is so powerful that one's individual identity can easily be subsumed by that of the group: Your tribe is who you are (or, perhaps it would be better to say it is who you may *think* that you are). There are about half a dozen tribes in South Africa, the largest of which is Zulu.

The tribal identity is so strong that it continues to have a powerful impact on South African politics. South Africa basically only has one effective political party: ANC, the African National Congress. There are signs this political monopoly may be weakening, but for now, the party of Nelson Mandela still rules unchallenged in South Africa. And whenever you have one-party rule anywhere in the world, it is a safe bet that corruption, graft, and cronyism are rampant.

Why don't South Africans find themselves a more capable set of leaders? One major reason is the tribal system. Because black Africans choose to identify so strongly with their tribe, the tribes have become the ultimate political machines. The tribal chief simply proclaims who the tribe will vote for, and virtually all members of the tribe will then vote for that individual. You would never vote against your tribe, so all the ANC has to do is keep a handful of rich tribal leaders happy through boundless graft and payola. Or at least that's how the moribund political structure was described to us during our trip.

"Colored people" in South Africa, by the way, aren't called colored because they are of mixed racial descent – although that is quite possible as well. In South Africa, colored simply means you are not white European, and you do not belong to a tribe. Usually, these are the descendants of those benighted souls who were captured, enslaved, and shipped off to South Africa. Because they have no tribal identity, and aren't white, there literally is no way to label who they are other than the phrase they have chosen for themselves: Colored. It appears that in the Cape Town area, at least, colored people were somewhat better off than black Africans were during the Apartheid era.



It was interesting to note that our fair-skinned, colored guide who took us around Cape Town did not consider herself a South African during the Apartheid era. She would not root for the South African team in the Olympic Games. She would not stand at attention to honor the South African flag. In her mind, her identity was not that of a South African. Since the end of Apartheid in 1994, she has been able to start her own tour company and run her own business. She has seen many of her friends do well. Today, she is proud to call herself a South African. She is Christian. But ask her who she is and she is liable to tell you she's a South African.

Relativism: What's in Your Wallet?

From a Christian perspective, the worrisome thing about post-Apartheid society in South Africa is its rising secular emphasis. This appears to result from the emphasis on avoiding social strife at all costs in a racially-charged environment.

The emphasis today in South African society is on reconciliation and tolerance. Avoiding any expression or behavior that could suggest a sense of superiority or absolute truth is considered the sine qua non of South African society. Thus, South Africans today have emerged from the brutality of Apartheid to embrace a new identity: They consider themselves part of a rainbow of ethnic cultures that -- through enlightened, non-judgmental culture -- has helped South Africa achieve new levels of success on the global stage.

The message of South Africa is one that should resonate with us today. Its entire history is a cautionary tale of the ravages of the sins of greed and materialism. While there is nothing wrong with the pursuit of wealth, Jesus was very clear that mammon could never be the focus of a God-pleasing life. Time and again, He challenged people to choose between their material obsessions and the eternal rewards that await those who properly choose an identity defined by their obedient relationship with Jesus Christ. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, He cautions His disciples, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

The pursuit and attainment of material wealth in both Europe and South Africa has corresponded with a sharp rise in secularism. When earning more and more money is the prime objective, absolute truths such as the absolute authority of Christ Jesus through the power of His Holy Spirit become threatening and offensive. It becomes politically incorrect to make any assertion that is non-relativistic in nature. "Go along to get along" becomes the mantra, and the entire society elevates "not rocking the boat" to an art form. When "all roads lead to heaven," no one need argue any longer over whether any given belief system is, in fact, the gospel truth. Then everyone can settle down and get on with the real issue: Making more money.

All these same attitudes are ascendant in America, where some polls show that the percentage of avowed secularists, atheists, and agnostics has doubled since just 2000. Indeed, whether we can stick to our beliefs in the face of a growing assault against absolute truths may well be the great challenge of our age.

The good news, as Christ followers, is that we are free to fight this battle without worrying about the outcome. Christ already has won the battle, and the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for the pulling down of strongholds, casting down every high thing that tries to exalt itself against the knowledge of God, so that we might take every thought captive to Jesus Christ.

But to run the race that the Apostle Paul envisioned, we must not lose sight of Him in whom our identity resides.

You may have seen the popular TV commercial for a credit card company. After touting the card's special benefits, the ad asks: "What's in Your Wallet?" As a child, I had such a wallet. It was one of those oval plastic coin purses you open by squeezing the two ends together. I believe it was a gift of my dear grandmother, God rest her soul, and it was one of two prized possessions that I had, or perhaps ever have had.

To understand this you need to appreciate that I was a sensitive kid and had some challenges my parents probably were unaware of. Basically, due to certain circumstances I felt I could not be sure I would survive any given day. And despite my parents' fond attentions, I wasn't too sure that I was genuinely loved (although of course I was).

My other prize possession was something I kept inside the purse. It was a small color image of Jesus Christ. I believe it was a gift from my mother. It was about two inches wide and about two and a half inches long. As a little boy, when things seemed very difficult and I felt I had nowhere else to turn, I would stare into those eyes of the image of Jesus, somehow knowing with the innocent limitless faith of a child that Jesus knew me. He knew who I was, He knew my problems, and I believed that somehow, no matter what, Jesus really would come and rescue me.

Knowing that Jesus loved him gave that little boy what he needed to survive.

I have certainly made a lot of dumb mistakes over the course of my life that I regret. But I can honestly say today that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what I believed to be true then is still what I believe today. God indeed does use the foolish to confound the wise.

So it's not what's in your wallet that matters. That's not who you really are anyway. The Apostle Paul made it clear in Ephesians 4:4 that, although each has special gifts, we have only one identity, and that is in Christ. He writes:

*"There is one body, and one Spirit,
even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all,
who is above all, and through all, and in you all."*

It is when we allow some other identity to define us -- Black African or White African, Rich African or Poor African, or a member of this or that tribe or interest group -- that we distance ourselves from Jehovah Shalom where our identity truly resides. The early identities that divide us fade away once we are in the kingdom:

*"Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision,
Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free:
but Christ is all, and in all." [Colossians 3:11]*

So the real question isn't "what?" but rather "who?" Who's in your wallet? I hope, I pray that Jesus will always reign in mine. And in yours.

And finally, please join me in praying for the brethren in South Africa, and for the future of our own nation as well. We pray in Jesus' name to cancel all false identities that are not in Christ and all deceitful divisions and lying vanities that would exalt themselves against the knowledge of God, and to neutralize the campaign of the evil one to stir up enmity by preying on confusion. Lord God, have mercy and send Your blessed Spirit of Revelation to show the people of South Africa, and of Africa and America generally, their true identity in Jesus Christ only. God bless them and keep them, make Your face to shine upon them, and give grace unto them. Lift up Your countenance upon them, and give them Peace. In the Holy merciful name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who is our identity, we pray. Amen.

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