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CHAPTER 1

MY NEW IDENTITY

SUMMERS GET PRETTY HOT in the South, and when you are practicing in the high school marching band after school, the ninety-degree heat can become unbearable. I played the piccolo, an instrument that resembles a miniature flute. We would stand for hours in formations with knees straight, shoulders back, chins up—all while the glaring sun was beating down on our worn-out bodies. My friend (a white male with chin-length blond hair) and I would sometimes run over to the market after band practice to grab a drink. It wasn't a far walk, and though dinnertime would be drawing close, my mouth, feeling like wool from blowing into my instrument, was desperate for refreshment. So we walked. One particular day was just like all others except for the rock that was thrown out of the window at us and the subsequent “nigger lover” epithet that followed.

This wasn't 1950 or even 1970. No, this was 1996. I grew

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up in a time and a town where people knew the right things to say, but every now and then blatant, startling racism spewed out. It could be as simple as the subtle look while shopping in the mall, or as clear as the time when a woman told me it was fine for me to be her son's friend, but he was "not allowed" to date me because it wasn't "right." She wasn't concerned about protecting her son from possibly ill-advised dating behavior; rather, she was concerned that I am black.

Obviously, I couldn't help that I am a black female. That was the way the Lord chose to make me. And despite the outright opposition I encountered early in life, I chose to fully embrace who I am.

FORMING MY IDENTITY

I remember sitting on my dad's lap as a young girl while he told stories about being beaten for not standing to sing "Dixie" at a sporting event and about the torture and pain that many blacks experienced in the South. He'd end his sobering stories, which never failed to rile me up, by saying, "But, Trillia, we need to love everyone regardless of race or religion." As a result, I grew up wanting to accept everyone, despite my own rejection at times. It was how my father raised me—to love those who hate you.

As young as thirteen years old, I was drawn to watch stories about the civil rights movement and wished I could have been there, living in that time to march among the protesters. I wanted to be one of those ladies holding a sign that read, "We march for integrated schools," or doing a sit-in at

a café, arms locked with other men and women and protesting, “Separate but equal.”

But that wasn’t my time period. I was born a decade after the civil rights movement had ended, and by the time I was comprehending those who came before me, we were well into the hard-rock era. Though it may be a repressed memory, I bet you remember: big hair, mismatched clothing, and scrunchies. Oh, the 80s. But I digress. I simply was born too late to be a part of the movement that meant so much to me.

Needless to say, I was incredibly thankful for the work of men like Martin Luther King Jr. Every year I would march in or watch our local Martin Luther King Day parade. I wanted to see what King dreamed of one day seeing: unity.

Though tremendous strides have been made since the civil rights movement, we can’t deny that racism was still alive and well in the 80s and 90s. The most infamous act of violence and racism against an African-American during this time period was the Rodney King beating. Though none of the four Los Angeles Police Department officers involved were convicted of a race-motivated crime, the damage had been done. Citizens of Los Angeles took to the streets in savage fashion, rioting and killing.¹ The 80s and 90s were also a time when the nation was continuing to attempt to implement the death of the Jim Crow separate-but-equal laws. We see it most clearly in the effort to desegregate public schools.²

It was against this societal backdrop that I began to develop a personal identity. Those were my formative years,

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and I had developed into a young woman who loved and embraced her blackness. I was thankful to be black, even while experiencing racist verbal attacks.

But even though I was content with my identity as a black female, I found myself in turmoil at times. I suppose there was a part of me that, while thankful for being black, was at the same time still in turmoil. You see, though I am black, I wasn't always accepted by my black peers while I was growing up. Some thought of me as a "white girl."

IDENTITY CRISIS

I'm what some people would call "proper." I speak clearly and articulate my words. I have a nondistinct accent, and well, some would just say I sound like a white girl. At least, that is what I was told in middle and high school. But my intonation and diction weren't the only things under scrutiny. I was often asked a loaded question: "Why do you act white?" I tried to not get angry, at least not in front of anyone. Instead I would come back with the quick-fire response, "What do you mean? Because I speak the way I do and I'm doing well in school, I am considered 'white'? That is just plain stupid." I had yet to learn gentleness.

This reverse racism started in middle school. Some of my black peers had accepted and adopted a stereotype for black Americans and then pressured and bullied me to fit that stereotype. It was absurd, and it communicated to me that I could not be black, smart, and articulate at the same time. It was awfully confusing for a thirteen-year-old.

These attitudes and pressures carried on into my high school years, and they're what contributed to my identity crisis. At home, I was the daughter of a black man and a black woman, the sister to black girls, the passionate civil rights activist (even though that movement was over), and the lady who sat under her father's teaching about race and racial reconciliation and longed to see racism of all kinds abolished forever. Yet at school I was labeled "white," not in color but in action. Who was I?

There wasn't much that would change this crisis in which I found myself. The confusion of being rejected by those I loved and questioned by those different from me was at times unbearable. That is, until Jesus sought me, saved me, and changed my identity.

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Do you ever experience something and think, *Hmmm, that must have been the Lord?*

That was my experience meeting Elizabeth. She was easily the polar opposite of me. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, a bubbly personality, and perfectly fit the descriptions "sweet" and "innocent." She was the type of gal that everyone loved and enjoyed being around. She was also a Christian.

Upon graduating from high school, I began leading cheer camps around the Southeast. I was a competitive cheerleader throughout high school, and teaching cheer camps during the summers was a perfect part-time job. Each camp session lasted for a week and consisted of at least two camp

leaders and anywhere from ten to two hundred kids (with the larger camps requiring more instructors). I worked at the camps for two summers, and during the second summer, Elizabeth and I were paired together week after week. But our first meeting was the tool that God used to change the whole course of my life.

I remember it like it was yesterday. Elizabeth and I were sharing a hotel room, and it was the night before the first day of camp. She got into her pajamas, plopped down on her bed, and threw her long, straight hair back into a ponytail. I was seated on my bed, wondering if she would mind if I turned on the television, when all of a sudden she broke open her Bible. I could feel the blood rush to my face. My guard immediately went up, and I spoke frankly, “What are you doing?”

She calmly said that she was going to read her Bible. I wasn’t convinced that she didn’t have something else up her sleeve. I was cautious and distrusting of Elizabeth, even fearful. And I had good reason—at least I was convinced that I did.

You see, I didn’t grow up in church. We were “holiday Christians.” We went to church on the major holidays such as Christmas and Easter. I did become a member of a church in my junior year of high school, but it did not pan out so well. I was a teenager and had fallen romantically for an unbeliever and decided the best solution was to leave the church. But leaving was difficult because church was where I spent much of my time and where many of my friends were. Word got

around that I was leaving, and it got ugly quickly.

I was pretty sure that my departure from the church was the end of my so-called Christian walk. I hated church after that experience, and the people in it nauseated me. Because of the animosity I experienced firsthand, I determined that I would distance myself as much as humanly possible from church. But that was not God's plan.

So here, at cheer camp, I found myself stuck rooming with a Christian girl for a week. Her Bible was open, ready for her to pore over the pages, and all I could think was what she might say to me and how she would scold me for leaving the church and quickly judge my life and choices.

Much to my surprise, by the end of the night we were both crying over my past church experience and my fears. And she had shared the gospel with me.

Elizabeth and I immediately became friends. But though we stayed in touch after our time together as camp counselors, it took a few years, a broken engagement, and condemnation over years of living in sin before I went to church—and stayed. I had visited her church a few times but was resistant to regular attendance. But after my engagement ended, I knew that was where I needed to be. The break-up felt like I was in one of those natural-disaster moments when everyone turns to God, but this time I didn't turn away from Him when the dust cleared. I could fight the Lord all I wanted, but His irresistible grace had taken my heart captive.

I will never forget the day I finally gave my life to the Lord. It was a Sunday morning, and I hadn't been back to the

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church in probably a year. While singing the hymn “Rock of Ages,” the Lord began to soften my heart, and He revealed His grace to me. After the service, I sought out Elizabeth and two other friends who prayed for me and guided me into new life. I was saved.

My rebirth was a time of rejoicing. The change in my heart was radical. And the transformation of my desires was almost instantaneous. God had taken out a heart of stone and replaced it with a beating heart of flesh, and it was on fire. I wanted nothing more than to share the good news with others. I was a new creation.

IN CHRIST

I love conversion stories. Remembering my own brings tears to my eyes and fills my heart with gladness. I rejoice when I hear about a man steeped in the drug culture who turns from his ways, or a woman who grew up in a religious home and finally comes to understand that her salvation is through faith alone by grace alone. All stories of God’s redeeming love are amazing, but the one that always moves me deeply is the conversion of Paul.

We first meet Paul (known at that time as Saul) at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). Saul was respected among Hebrews and in Jerusalem. By his own account, he had earnestly obeyed the law and was of noble blood: “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the

law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5–6). He went through homes and imprisoned men and women, ravaged the church, and approved of killings and beatings of followers of Jesus. He was the last person anyone would have thought would one day also be a follower of Jesus Christ, let alone one of the greatest missionaries Christianity has ever known. But when God saves, there’s a radical transformation.

Paul’s conversion was quite dramatic. First, a light flashed from heaven, and the voice of the Lord began to speak. Paul went blind, and this independent, fierce leader of persecution needed assistance from his buddies to walk him to Damascus. Once there, he didn’t eat and remained blind for three days until Ananias showed up. Ananias was there only because Jesus had directly commanded him to go to Saul, lay hands on him, and restore his sight. Ananias was scared—and rightly so. Saul was well-known and feared by the early church because of his zealous persecution. Nevertheless, Ananias obeyed and went to meet with Saul. When he laid hands upon him, something “like scales” fell from Saul’s eyes, and his vision returned. Immediately Saul was baptized, and immediately after that he began to proclaim Christ in the synagogues (Acts 9:1–22).

Our conversion experiences may not be as dramatic as Paul’s. Okay, they probably aren’t close to being as dramatic. But the results are the *exact* same. When Paul was converted, his old self was completely gone; he was a new man (Colossians 3:10). John Piper explains it like this: “In conversion, our old self died and was laid aside with its impulses and

drives and values and loves and convictions. And a new self was created by God. This is called in other places ‘the new birth’ or being born again (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:3).”³

With this new birth comes a new identity. We no longer live for ourselves—and we are no longer ourselves. We are a new creation. Paul wrote about this new creation in Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Being identified with Christ means full and free acceptance by God, the ability to approach a holy God, no condemnation, complete forgiveness, righteousness before God, and presentation to God one day as blameless and perfect. Now, that’s amazing grace!

What I discovered as I grew in my Christian faith was that my identity is not solely that I am a black female, nor is it dependent on what others think of me. My identity is in Christ.

When I find my identity in Christ and not in outward appearance, there’s satisfaction. I’m satisfied in Him because He loves me. Elyse Fitzpatrick puts it this way: “I don’t need to be concerned with these things at all, because I’ve been given assurances that eclipse all else. I’ve been given the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who is able to save me to the uttermost and who is living, right now, in this very instant, to make intercession for me before his Father (Heb. 7:25).”⁴

As Christians we have been given the God-man! Jesus—fully God and fully man—is ours. There isn’t a love that can

trump this. When God looks at us, He no longer sees the sin that so ensnared us before salvation; He now sees us clothed in Christ's righteousness. He looks at us and sees His Son's perfect obedience. He sees beauty. God sees us in Christ.

God wrecked my identity crisis. *I am in Christ.*

It was as if all the knowledge that was in my head had become a reality. I got it. I finally understood that my identity is not my own—my identity isn't about me. But it's one thing to know this truth; it's another to understand it and have opportunities to apply it. I am thankful that I have found

those opportunities within my church and throughout my walk with Christ.

**BEING BLACK IS
A PART OF MY
IDENTITY. BUT
IT ISN'T MY
ENTIRE IDENTITY.**

NO LONGER JUST A BLACK GIRL

As I reflect on my conversion, the effects stagger me. Understanding that my identity is no longer in my blackness, what I do and don't do, or how others view me has been incredibly freeing. This knowledge allows me to enjoy my relationship with Christ and my relationships with others. It has also provided me the opportunity to enjoy my identity as a black woman in a better way.

I am made by God in His image. God created me, all of me (Psalm 139:13). I can celebrate my differences and em-

brace all that God has for me because I am His creation. My identity is no longer in crisis. I am black to His glory. I was created by God for a purpose. I am in Christ by His grace, and all Christians can justly, because of Christ, say the same.

And though the new identity now trumps all other identity claims on my life, one fact remains—to those who see me, I am black.

First impressions matter. Before I open my mouth, people have summed me up (consciously or otherwise) to varying degrees. If someone were to describe me without knowing me or speaking to me, they might say, “You are a female, short in stature, and have dark hair, brown eyes, and, well, are black.” People are not truly “color blind.” Being black is a part of my identity. But it isn’t *my entire identity*.

After my conversion, it was apparent to me that being black isn’t my entire identity. I knew it wasn’t even my *first* identity. And though the richness of that truth took some time to sink in, I had become first a Christian, then a black woman. Nevertheless, I found myself in a predominantly white church—in Christ yet still different. I immersed myself in this church, and even though I was one of only a handful of minorities there, my minority status didn’t matter to me at first. I was so overcome by the work God had done in my heart that nothing else really mattered.

My identity crisis was over, but a new war in my heart began. I was different, which was plain to me, and I was occasionally innocently reminded of it. My new identity didn’t erase the obvious cultural and physical differences between

My New Identity

me and my white brothers and sisters in Christ. We *were* different, although the same in Christ. Our differences were clearly felt, and as a result, I would at times feel lonely, isolated, and even fearful. My identity was secure, but there was something missing in my fellowship, a longing deep in my heart that became clear over time.