ADULTS SAVING KIDS
Founded by Alvin Erickson

FOUNDATIONAL INTRODUCTION

A Child's Identity in Christ

Five Foundational Truths for Christian Parents

INTRODUCTION

Who Am I?

Who am I?

It seems like a simple question, but our answers influence much of how we live.

We might describe ourselves by our family relationships, occupations, abilities, accomplishments, or interests. Others may describe us by our successes, failures, personalities, or reputations.

Children begin developing beliefs about themselves long before they can fully understand what identity means. Their experiences, relationships, and the words spoken to them help shape how they see themselves.

A CHILD MAY BEGIN TO BELIEVE,

I am smart.

I am loved.

I belong.

BUT A CHILD MIGHT ALSO COME TO BELIEVE,

I am stupid.

I am unwanted.

Something is wrong with me.

These beliefs matter because they can influence how children respond to difficulties, make decisions, and relate to other people.

For Christian parents, there is another important question:

> *Who does God say my child is?*

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The Christian understanding of identity begins not with what we accomplish, how we feel, or what others think of us, but with what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Baptism, grace, forgiveness, and belonging in Christ provide a foundation for understanding our lives.

The following five principles introduce this understanding of identity and why it matters for raising children.

They are not intended to answer every parenting question. Instead, they establish a foundation for later lessons about communication, correction, relationships, and protecting children from manipulation.

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TRUTH 1

A Child Can Mistake Someone Else's Judgment for Their Identity

The Broken Jar of Jam

Imagine a mother and her five-year-old daughter walking through a grocery store.

The little girl, Suzie, is curious about the items on the shelves. She reaches toward a jar of jam, accidentally knocks it over, and watches it shatter on the floor.

Her mother, embarrassed and frustrated, exclaims:

> *"Suzie! How could you be so stupid?"*

Suzie knows she made a mistake. But now she has heard something more troubling.

Her mother has called her stupid.

A question begins forming in her mind: *If my mother thinks I'm stupid, perhaps I really am.*

Years later, Suzie may achieve considerable academic and professional success and still struggle with the belief that she is somehow inadequate.

This is an illustration, not a prediction that one hurtful comment will determine a child's future. Nevertheless, it reveals an important distinction.

> *There is a difference between what a child does and who a child believes they are.*

Children learn about themselves partly through the responses of people they trust. Parents are among the most influential voices in their lives.

A parent's words can encourage courage, confidence, and responsibility. They can also contribute to shame, insecurity, and false beliefs about personal worth.

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WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES

Proverbs 18:21 reminds us that the tongue has the power of death and life.

James 3:1–12 uses several illustrations to demonstrate how something as small as the tongue can have an enormous influence.

These passages remind us that words matter.

The way parents speak to children can influence far more than the immediate situation.

A child needs to learn that breaking a jar was a mistake. But breaking a jar does not make the child stupid.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH

A child's actions and mistakes must not become labels that define their identity.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

What might my child be learning about themselves from the words I use?

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TRUTH 2

Identity Influences Behavior, but Behavior Does Not Define Identity

What we believe about ourselves can influence the choices we make.

A person who believes honesty is part of their character may be more determined to tell the truth, even when doing so is difficult.

A child who believes they are incapable may hesitate to attempt something challenging.

A teenager who believes they are unworthy of love may be particularly vulnerable to someone offering affection or acceptance for the wrong reasons.

Our beliefs do not control every decision, but they can influence our behavior.

This brings us to the concept of integrity.

Integrity means living in a way that is consistent with what we believe to be true and right.

Martin Luther and the Courage of Conviction

In 1521, Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms, an assembly of religious and political authorities.

He was pressured to withdraw teachings that challenged the established church.

Luther maintained that unless he was convinced by Scripture and sound reasoning, he could not recant because his conscience was bound by God's Word.

His position illustrates the relationship between belief, conscience, and behavior.

Luther believed that acting contrary to his convictions would violate his integrity.

Of course, conscience is not automatically correct simply because a person feels strongly about something. Conscience must be informed by truth, Scripture, wisdom, and a willingness to be corrected.

But Luther's example raises an important question for parents.

> *Are we simply teaching children to obey rules, or are we helping them develop convictions that will guide their behavior even when no authority figure is watching?*

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WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES

Ephesians 4:1 urges believers to live in a manner worthy of their calling.

The calling comes first. The manner of living follows.

Christian behavior is meant to grow out of an understanding of who we are in Christ.

When children act contrary to what they know is right, they need guidance, correction, and opportunities to make things right.

But their wrongdoing should not become their identity.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH

We want children to develop convictions that guide their choices while understanding that their mistakes do not determine their worth.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Am I helping my child understand why something is right or wrong, or am I concerned only with obedience?

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TRUTH 3

Our Deepest Identity in Christ Is Received, Not Earned

Much of life seems to revolve around performance.

Children receive grades, compete in sports, compare appearances, seek friendships, and discover talents.

These experiences can be valuable. But they can also encourage the belief that personal worth must be earned.

> *If I get good grades, I am valuable.*
>
> *If people like me, I am important.*
>
> *If I fail, I am a failure.*

Christianity offers a different foundation for identity.

Grace Comes Before Achievement

Ephesians 2:8–10 teaches that salvation comes through God's grace, not through our accomplishments.

We do not earn our place with God by being sufficiently successful, popular, or good.

Our relationship with God rests on what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us.

Verse 10 then describes believers as God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Notice the order.

We are not told to perform good works in order to make ourselves worthy of God's love.

Rather, good works flow from the new life God gives.

Baptism and Our Identity

Within the Lutheran understanding of Christian faith, baptism is central to this new identity.

Romans 6:3–5 describes baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrection, so that believers may walk in newness of life.

Martin Luther taught that baptism is not simply an event in the past.

In his Large Catechism, he describes repentance as a return to baptism.

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Throughout life, Christians continue to struggle with sin, make mistakes, repent, and receive forgiveness.

Baptism continually directs believers back to God's promises rather than their own accomplishments or failures.

The Prodigal Son

Jesus tells a remarkable story in Luke 15:11–32.

A younger son demands his inheritance, leaves home, and wastes everything.

Eventually, hungry and desperate, he decides to return to his father.

But he no longer believes he deserves to be called a son.

He hopes his father might accept him as a hired servant.

His father sees things differently.

When he sees his son approaching, he runs to welcome him, embraces him, and celebrates his return.

The son's behavior had been destructive. His choices had consequences.

But the father still recognized him as his son.

> *The son believed he had lost his identity. His father still knew who he was.*

This story illustrates the distinction between wrongdoing and belonging.

It does not suggest that mistakes have no consequences. It reveals the extraordinary nature of grace and reconciliation.

WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES

Romans 8:15–17 describes believers as God's adopted children and heirs.

Ephesians 2:8–10 explains the relationship between grace, identity, and good works.

Luke 15 illustrates the father's welcome of a returning son.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH

Our identity in Christ rests on God's grace, not our achievements, failures, or the opinions of others.

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> **A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION**
> *Does my child understand that love and belonging are not rewards they must continually earn?*

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TRUTH 4

Parents Are Stewards of Children, Not the Authors of Their Worth

Parents have enormous influence over their children.

They provide food, shelter, instruction, protection, discipline, and love.

But what is the deeper purpose of parenting?

It is easy to think of children primarily as my children.

We may begin to measure their behavior by how well they reflect on us, how quickly they obey, or whether they meet our expectations.

Your child misbehaves in public, and suddenly you feel embarrassed.

Your teenager makes a poor decision, and you wonder what others will think about your parenting.

These reactions are understandable.

But Christian parenting invites us to consider a different perspective.

Children are entrusted to our care by God. They do not belong to us as possessions.

We are responsible for nurturing them, teaching them, protecting them, and preparing them for adulthood.

> *We are not responsible for inventing their worth or determining their ultimate identity.*

Lydia and the Philippian Jailer

Acts 16 contains two accounts that help us consider the influence of faith within a household.

The first concerns Lydia, a businesswoman who listened to Paul's teaching near Philippi.

After Lydia and her household were baptized, she welcomed Paul and his companions into her home.

The second concerns a jailer responsible for guarding Paul and Silas.

Following an earthquake and a remarkable encounter with the prisoners, the jailer heard the Christian message. He and his household were baptized.

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These stories do not tell us the ages of all the household members or precisely how their faith developed afterward.

Nevertheless, they demonstrate that Christian faith was experienced within households and communities, not merely as an isolated individual concern.

For parents, this raises an important consideration.

Our children learn about faith not only through formal instruction but also through daily family life.

- They observe how we respond to disappointment.
- They hear how we speak about others.
- They notice whether we apologize when we are wrong.
- They see whether our actions agree with the values we teach.

WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES

Ephesians 6:4 instructs parents not to provoke their children to anger but to raise them in the instruction of the Lord.

Colossians 3:21 warns against discouraging children.

These instructions recognize that parental authority must be exercised with care.

Parents are called to guide children toward maturity, not simply to demand submission.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH

Parenting is a responsibility entrusted to us by God. Our task is to nurture children as people of inherent worth, not to make their value depend on our approval.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

What is my child learning about love, forgiveness, and integrity by watching how I live?

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TRUTH 5

What We Believe About Ourselves Is Not Necessarily the Final Truth About Who We Are

All of us carry thoughts about ourselves.

Some are encouraging.

Others can be deeply painful.

> *I'm not good enough.*
>
> *Nobody really loves me.*
>
> *I always ruin everything.*
>
> *Something is wrong with me.*

These thoughts may arise from childhood experiences, failures, criticism, rejection, or mistreatment.

Sometimes they become so familiar that we stop questioning them.

We begin treating them as facts.

> *But believing something about ourselves does not necessarily make it true.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Question: Who Am I?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian imprisoned by the Nazi regime for his resistance activities.

While in prison, he wrote a poem titled Who Am I?

In the poem, Bonhoeffer contrasts the confident, composed person others believe him to be with the frightened, exhausted, and troubled person he experiences within himself.

Which one is the real Bonhoeffer?

The man others see?

The man he sees in himself?

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He concludes by entrusting the answer to God.

His poem captures a struggle many people experience.

Our outward appearance, inward feelings, and true identity do not always seem to agree.

God Is Greater Than Our Hearts

First John 3:20 reminds Christians that God is greater than our hearts.

This is a profound statement.

Our feelings are real, and they deserve attention. They can alert us to fear, sadness, guilt, or danger.

But feelings do not always tell us the complete truth.

> *A child who feels unwanted is not necessarily unwanted.*
>
> *A teenager who feels worthless is not worthless.*
>
> *Someone who has been abused or exploited has not lost their human dignity or worth.*

> *The wrong done to a person does not become the identity of that person.*

For Christian parents, the goal is to help children understand that God's knowledge and love are greater than the labels, judgments, and painful experiences that may influence how they see themselves.

Why This Matters for Protection

This principle has particular importance for Adults Saving Kids.

People who manipulate children may exploit feelings of rejection, shame, loneliness, or insecurity.

They may offer affection, attention, belonging, or promises of a better life.

A child who believes they have little worth may find those promises especially appealing.

A strong sense of identity does not make a child immune to manipulation. Responsibility for exploitation always belongs to the person who exploits.

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But helping children understand their worth, recognize false messages, and develop trustworthy relationships can be part of preparing them to respond to manipulation.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH

Neither the judgments of others nor our own painful thoughts have the final word about our identity in Christ.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

When my child believes something painful about themselves, how can I help them examine that belief rather than simply accept it?

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PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Bringing the Five Foundational Truths Together

These five principles provide a foundation for understanding identity from a Christian perspective.

> **First,** children can mistake the judgments of others for the truth about themselves.
>
> **Second,** identity influences behavior, but behavior does not define a person's worth.
>
> **Third,** our deepest identity in Christ is received through God's grace, not earned through achievement.
>
> **Fourth,** parents are entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing children, not determining their worth.
>
> **Fifth,** our own thoughts and feelings are not always reliable measures of who we truly are.

Together, these principles invite parents to think differently about their influence.

Parenting is not simply about producing well-behaved children.

It involves helping children understand who they are, what they believe, how they should live, and why their worth does not disappear when they fail.

These truths also prepare us for the practical questions that follow.

> - *How do children develop beliefs about themselves?*
> - *How can parents correct behavior without creating shame?*
> - *How do we help children recognize manipulation?*
> - *How can we develop relationships strong enough that children feel able to come to us when something has gone terribly wrong?*

Those questions will be explored in subsequent ASK courses.

> FOR NOW, THE FOUNDATION IS THIS
>
> **Our children need more than instructions about how to behave. They need an understanding of who they are and whose they are.**

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OPTIONAL

Further Reading and Study

For readers who wish to explore these ideas in greater depth

The five foundational principles above provide everything needed to continue into the practical ASK parenting courses.

The resources below are offered for those who enjoy deeper biblical study, theological reflection, or research into child development.

These readings are entirely optional. No additional study is required before continuing.

Truth 1: How Words Influence Identity

SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 18:21	The power of words.
James 3:1–12	The influence of the tongue.
Ephesians 4:29	Speech that builds others up.
Colossians 3:21	Avoiding discouragement in children.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, Shame and Guilt (2002).

This work explores the psychological differences between shame and guilt, including how they relate to behavior and relationships.

Readers may also wish to explore research on parental criticism, attachment, and the development of children's self-concept.

Truth 2: Identity, Conscience, and Integrity

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 4:1	Living in a manner worthy of our calling.
Romans 12:2	Renewal of the mind.
James 1:22	Becoming doers of the Word.
Galatians 2:11–14	Paul's correction of Peter when his behavior contradicted his convictions.

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY

Martin Luther's appearance before the Diet of Worms, April 1521.

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Luther's defense provides an opportunity to study conscience, Scripture, conviction, and the courage to act according to one's beliefs.

The familiar phrase "Here I stand" is traditionally associated with his declaration, although its precise historical wording is debated.

Truth 3: Identity Received Through Grace

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 2:8–10	Grace, faith, and good works.
Romans 6:3–5	Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.
Romans 8:15–17	Adoption as God's children.
Luke 15:11–32	The prodigal son.
Colossians 2:6–15	Being rooted in Christ and raised with him through baptism.

THEOLOGICAL STUDY

Martin Luther, Large Catechism, Part IV: Baptism.

Especially valuable is Luther's discussion of baptism as an enduring reality in Christian life and repentance as a return to baptism.

Readers may also explore Luther's Small Catechism, particularly the section on the meaning of baptism for daily life.

Truth 4: Parents as Stewards

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 6:1–4	Responsibilities within the parent-child relationship.
Colossians 3:20–21	Instruction to parents and children.
Deuteronomy 6:4–9	Teaching faith through everyday life.
Acts 16:11–15	Lydia and her household.
Acts 16:25–34	The Philippian jailer and his household.
Matthew 19:13–15	Jesus welcoming children.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Readers may study how Christian teaching has understood parents' responsibilities for spiritual formation, moral instruction, and the development of children.

The household accounts in Acts 16 are particularly useful for reflection, while recognizing that the text does not provide a detailed account of the subsequent upbringing or spiritual education of household members.

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Truth 5: False Beliefs and Our True Identity

SCRIPTURE

1 John 3:18–22	God is greater than our hearts.
Romans 8:31–39	Nothing can separate believers from God's love in Christ.
2 Corinthians 5:16–17	A new creation in Christ.
John 15:9–17	Abiding in Christ's love.
Psalm 139:1–18	Being known by God.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Who Am I?

Written during his imprisonment, this poem explores the difference between how others perceive us, how we perceive ourselves, and our identity before God.

It provides a meaningful companion to the discussion of self-judgment and identity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

Readers interested in the developmental dimension may explore research on shame, attachment, self-concept, and the effects of emotional abuse.

These subjects can help explain how painful beliefs about oneself develop, while theological study addresses the Christian understanding of human worth and identity in Christ.

A Note About These Resources

Scripture, theology, history, and developmental psychology contribute different kinds of understanding.

Scripture and Christian theology establish the faith-based foundation of this course.

Historical examples illustrate how individuals have wrestled with questions of identity, conscience, and conviction.

Developmental research helps us understand how children form beliefs about themselves and how relationships may influence those beliefs.

Together, these perspectives can deepen our understanding of the responsibilities and opportunities involved in Christian parenting.

Readers are welcome to explore these subjects further, but the essential principles have already been introduced.

> *The next step is learning how to put them into practice.*

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