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Workplace Group Resources

Growing as Disciples in Today's Workplace: **Christian Identity**

LEADER'S GUIDE

A four-session Bible study

Paul Valler

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Introduction

Christian Identity is a set of four sessions about understanding how our identity shapes us at work. They form the first study in the LICC series *Growing Disciples in Today's Workplace*. The second study is *Relating Well in Organisations*. Each session is designed to be 30 minutes for Christian workplace groups to study together, with some follow-up material for personal reflection.

Each session has a session guide, two audio recordings for the scene setter and the teaching, scripts of the audio for groups who would rather read together, and a handout to be given to each group participant. One person should act as the group leader for every session and facilitate the questions, discussion, and prayer.

Whilst these sessions do quote from the Bible in support of the narrative, they do not offer an expository approach but draw more broadly on general principles in Scripture relating to the theme of Christian identity.

About the author

Paul Valler is Chair of LICC's Board of Trustees, a Work Forum Associate at LICC, life coach, and regular speaker on workplace ministry. Formerly the Finance and Human Resources Director of Hewlett-Packard Ltd., his mission is to inspire people to make the right choices as they navigate through life. Paul is the author of *Get a Life* (IVP) and *Using Measurement Well* (Grove Leadership Series).

SESSION 1 Value

Scene Setter (5 mins)

Listen to the introductory talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 5.

Questions for Discussion and Personal Reflection (15 mins)

- Where have you become driven by the expectations of others, or even of yourself? Where do you feel you cannot say 'no'? Why? What might you be sacrificing because of your driven-ness?
- How does it make you feel if you don't work for a while? (e.g. Tired? Relieved? Guilty? Disoriented? Desperate to get on?...). What do those feelings tell you about yourself?
- What impact on others in the workplace does your own approach to work have?
- If you were assessed to be a poor performer, or if you lost your job, how much impact would that have on your sense of self-worth? In practice, how much do you believe your personal identity and value is tied-up with your job and your performance?

Teaching (5 mins)

Listen to the talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 6.

Prayer to Renounce Driven-ness and Perfectionism

The protestant work ethic is alive and well. There is a good side to that, but don't let it define your identity! Pray the prayer in the right-hand column.

Group Response/Reflections (3 mins)

Take time to reflect on what you've listened to and discussed. Give people an opportunity to share their thoughts on what's struck them most.

A Prayer to Renounce Drivenness and Perfectionism

Lord, I renounce the lie that my self-worth is dependent upon my ability to perform. I announce the truth that my identity and sense of worth is found in who I am as your child.

I renounce seeking the approval and acceptance of other people, and I choose to believe that I am already approved and accepted in Christ because of his death and resurrection for me.

I choose to believe the truth that I have been saved, not by deeds done in righteousness, but according to your mercy. I choose to believe that I am no longer under the curse of the law because Christ became a curse for me. I receive the free gift of life in Christ and choose to abide in him. I renounce striving for perfection by living under the law.

By your grace, Heavenly Father, I choose from this day forward to walk by faith in the power of your Holy Spirit, according to what you have said is true. **In Jesus' name. Amen**

©Freedom in Christ Ministries. From *Steps to Freedom in Christ*, Neil Anderson (Monarch Books, ficm.org.uk)

For further study

- Meditate on 1 John 3:1. Repeat the Freedom in Christ prayer on your own.
- Identify something at work where you need to say 'no'.
- Read *Get a Life* by Paul Valler: Chapters 2 and 3
- Read *Spiritual Intelligence* by Brian Draper: Chapters 5, 6, and 7

SESSION 2 Community

Scene Setter (5 mins)

Listen to the introductory talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 8.

Questions for Discussion and Personal Reflection (15 mins)

- What are the most helpful aspects of our workplace Christian network? What is missing in it compared to a local church community?
- Where have you benefited at work from the support of another Christian? How have you helped other Christians in their workplace?
- How does the Christian community help you to be fruitful on your frontline at work? What collective impact is Christian community in your workplace having on the wider organisation?
- If you have an issue at work on which you would appreciate Christian support and guidance, to whom in the wider body of Christ would you go to be able to share it confidentially and receive help?

Teaching (5 mins)

Listen to the talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 9.

Group Response/Reflections (3 mins)

Take time to reflect on what you've listened to and discussed. Give people an opportunity to share their thoughts on what's struck them most.

For further study

- Identify a few key believers with whom you can meet regularly to pray about your work. Discuss with them how and when you might meet.
- If you already belong to a small group in a church, set the ball rolling by asking people to pray for you in your daily workplace. Do the same for them.
- Read *Get a Life* by Paul Valler: Chapters 6 and 7
- Read *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* by Mark Greene: Chapter 4

SESSION 3 Authenticity

Scene Setter (5 mins)

Listen to the introductory talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 11.

Questions for Discussion and Personal Reflection (15 mins)

- Can you think of a recent example of where you felt your Christian authenticity was being tested? What is your most encouraging workplace experience about being authentic as a Christian?
- Do you see being authentic about your faith as an opportunity or a threat? How safe is it to be known as a Christian in your work? How much do you wear a mask in front of your colleagues/boss/customers?
- The role of a Christian at work has been summarised as: Modelling godly character, Making good work, Ministering grace and love, Moulding culture, being a Mouthpiece for truth and justice, and being a Messenger of the gospel (the 6Ms). In which of these areas do you believe you have had most impact, and least impact?

Teaching (5 mins)

Listen to the talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 12.

Group Response/Reflections (3 mins)

Take time to reflect on what you've listened to and discussed. Give people an opportunity to share their thoughts on what's struck them most.

For further study

- Ask your support group to pray for you at work in an area where you feel your authenticity is being tested.
- Choose a spiritual discipline to pursue in order to get closer to God. (There are many examples in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster)
- Discuss with your workplace Christian colleagues how you might collectively have a greater impact on your organisation.
- Read *Get a Life* by Paul Valler: Chapters 5, 8, and 9
- Read *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* by Mark Greene: Chapters 4, 6, and 8

SESSION 4 Resilience

Scene Setter (5 mins)

Listen to the introductory talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 15.

Questions for Discussion and Personal Reflection (15 mins)

- What aspect of the culture or situation where you work tends to most suppress or inhibit your living for Christ? Where at work do you feel most released and flourishing as a Christian?
- Where do you think there may be a personal boundary that you are being tempted or pressured to cross at work?
- Can you give an example of where being a Christian at work resulted in something difficult or hurtful? How have you dealt with that?
- How do you deal with the sense of guilt that comes from having crossed a personal boundary? How do you come back from failure?

Teaching (5 mins)

Listen to the talk [here](#) or read it out from the script on page 16.

Group Response/Reflections (3 mins)

Take time to reflect on what you've listened to and discussed. Give people an opportunity to share their thoughts on what's struck them most.

For further study

- Think of a time when you were hurt at work. Pray forgiveness and blessing for those who hurt you.
- Think of a time when you felt a failure at work. Pray to receive God's forgiveness and restoration.
- Read *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* by Mark Greene: Chapters 7 and 8
- Read *Get a Life* by Paul Valler: Chapter 9
- Read *A Resilient Life* by Gordon MacDonald

Session Scripts

SESSION 1 Value

Scene Setter

Welcome to this series on *Growing as Disciples in Today's Workplace*. This is the first module on the topic of Christian identity in the workplace. In each session there will be a short introduction, then a series of questions for you to consider and discuss, a short teaching element, and then some suggested follow up material for those who are interested.

In this first session on Christian identity we will be looking at the topic of our value. The Bible makes it clear that when we put our trust in Christ we are born again of his Spirit and become adopted children of God. Scripture says, 'How great the love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!' (1 John 3:1).

Yet for many Christians at work, our true identity is often stolen by other things. There are many pressures that can cause us to forget the truth about who we are in Christ. In his book *Spiritual Intelligence*, Brian Draper tells us, 'Our mind forms a meaningful story out of what is going on around us.' We have a tendency to attach ourselves to things that help us create an identity.

You are not your job, or your position in the organisation. You are not the car you drive or the clothes you wear. You are not

the house you live in or the balance in your bank account. You are not defined by your sales figures, or your customer feedback, or your financial results. Yet in practice all these things seem to have a significant influence on how we see ourselves.

Professional and managerial people are especially affected by their achievements, their successes, and their failures. There is a tendency to compete with other people and compare ourselves to them. This is also true for sports people and those who work in the military. Any environment where achievements and targets are constantly measured can lead to a fear of failure, or fear of being outshone by someone else. That is what can cause many of us to live driven lives, constantly striving not to fail or be seen to fail.

We see this happening in Scripture. Take the rather insecure King Saul, for example. Young women were dancing and singing about the victory of Saul's army. But what they sang was: "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands." Saul was very angry. This refrain displeased him greatly. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David' (1 Samuel 18:7-9).

Saul was a man who believed his self-worth

depended on his performance. So anyone who was outperforming him threatened his self-worth.

Then there was a man called Jephthah, another somewhat insecure individual. The leaders of his people promised Jephthah that if he could defeat their enemy, the Ammonites, he would become their overall leader. He was so desperate to achieve this that he made a vow to the LORD: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering' (Judges 11:30-31).

Tragically, when he returned home after a magnificent victory, the first thing to come out of the door of his house was his daughter, an only child. So in one sense he was successful, attaining the position of leader, but the personal cost to his family was enormous.

For Jephthah, success was so vital for his ego that he was willing to make a vow to sacrifice anything to achieve it. That vow made achievement an idol more important than anything or anyone else.

As we consider the pressure under which we work, how much do we identify with getting our identity from our achievements and our roles at work?

Teaching

If we believe our identity is based on our performance, then of course we strive to achieve as much as possible – because we feel our self-worth depends on it. We look for acceptance from other people through our achievements and we do get some transient and temporary recognition. But pretty soon our results are forgotten or eclipsed by other things. So that sense of acceptance is fragile and many start trying to achieve more in an attempt to make themselves once again feel good about themselves. This is a cycle of grief, because the acceptance we gain through achievement is soon lost to us.

This driven pattern of behaviour is rooted in a deep doubt about the unconditional love of God. We may give intellectual assent to the fact that God loves us, but in practice our emotional insecurity is shown up by the way we still depend on our own achievements and go looking for approval and acceptance through other people. Because the underlying cultural assumption in many of our organizations is still conditional acceptance based on merit, driven-ness and perfectionism become common patterns of behaviour.

Jesus encountered the same issue in his temptation in the wilderness. It is written that the devil said to him: '**If you are the Son of God**, tell these stones to become bread. **If you are the Son of God**, throw yourself

down from the temple and God will send his angels to catch you.' In other words Jesus was tempted to try to prove his identity by what he could do, to prove his worth by his performance. But instead of responding by trying to prove himself, his answers showed he knew his true identity. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

The opposite to a cycle of grief is a cycle of grace. This starts with the deep knowledge of our unconditional acceptance by God. When we know that we are beloved through his grace, we are sustained and we do not have to strive for our self-worth. He has brought us into a relationship with him as his adopted children, and our significance comes out of the status that God has given us. Yes, we still work hard seeking to do a good job, but psychologically that energy is not driven by a gnawing sense of insecurity or fear, it flows from our love for God and our desire to serve him. The cycle of grace leads to well-being and inner peace. We feel released to be fruitful and effective.

That is why the Bible says: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving' (Colossians 3:23-24).

It is the Lord Christ you are serving. So our primary calling is to Christ, our secondary calling is to our job or vocation. We may be called accountants, or lawyers, or some other professional group, but we are first

and foremost Christians, loved by God as his children and working for him. We are Christians first; accountants, lawyers or whatever second.

The key learning from all this is that the unconditional acceptance of God has the power to neutralise the power of a performance culture to control us through our insecurity. If our identity is sourced from the grace of God and not from our performance we are more free to say 'no' to over-commitment and more free to succeed with a healthy motivation to serve. Even failure does not totally wreck our self-esteem.

Neil Anderson in his *Freedom in Christ* discipleship programme focuses on this issue with a prayer declaration to renounce driven-ness and perfectionism. This prayer is in front of you now and I invite you to pray it out loud together, because declarations are more powerful when they are heard. Faith comes from hearing.

SESSION 2 Community

Scene Setter

Welcome to our second session in this module about Christian identity, which forms part of the series on *Growing as Disciples in Today's Workplace*. Last time in Session 1 we looked at the issue of personal value. We saw how easy it is for us to allow our identity to be influenced and even defined by the things around us, like our job or our role or achievements. We looked at what happens when we base our self-worth on our performance, and how that thinking leads to a success-based self-image that causes driven-ness and insecurity. We talked about trusting in the unconditional acceptance of God and the grace of God, so that we become much more secure, and so our motivation to work well flows from our love for God and our desire to please him. Our identity is then based on our relationship with God and not on what we can achieve.

This session considers how living in community has an impact on our identity, and how we need a Christian community to help nurture and strengthen our Christian identity and discipleship in the workplace.

Every social group that we belong to affects our sense of identity by association. Many large organisations go to considerable lengths to assimilate their employees into a common culture and help them identify with the core vision

and values. The culture and peer pressure then influence an employee's thinking and behaviour. If those workplaces are secular, some of the values will be values of the world, not of Christ. So to help protect our Christian identity from being subverted by the values around us, we also need Christian community to balance that influence.

The Bible says: 'Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world' (1 John 2:15-16).

We are all influenced by the culture around us, often unconsciously. So it makes sense to belong to a Christian community that helps us remember our true identity.

A Christian without a community to teach and support them as a believer can all too easily slip into being influenced more and more by other values. Our professional or organizational identity can then dominate our thinking and our priorities.

But in today's busy world, finding and belonging to a Christian community that supports us can be a challenge. Workplaces are often geographically remote from the local church communities near where we live. Long working hours and commuting mean it is often difficult to meet face-to-face with other Christians. And even if we do find

Christians that we can meet with, they may not understand much about our working environment, or identify with the kind of issues we face.

So many believers find themselves a bit like 'lone rangers' in the workplace. They are out there on the frontline in the working world lacking support or guidance from the wider body of Christ.

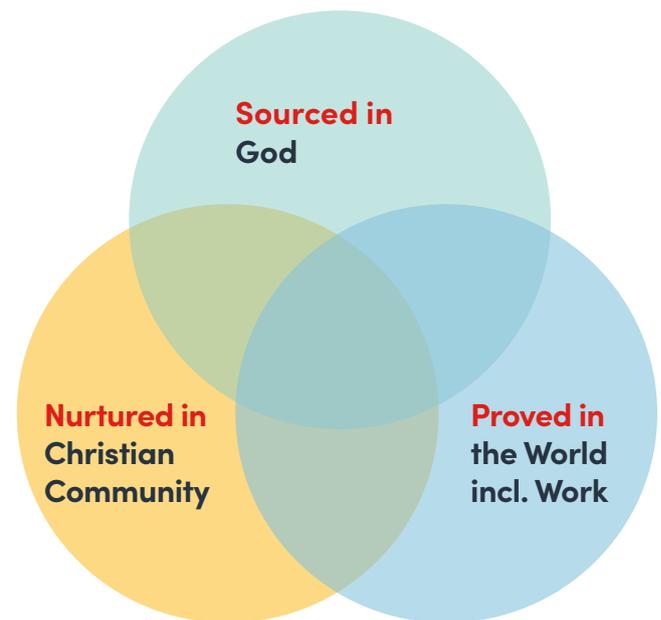
I have talked with many people who struggle with a key relationship at work – maybe with their boss, or a key client – but don't have anyone to talk it through confidentially or pray about it with. Others have a difficult decision or an ethical issue that comes up at work that can leave them wondering what to do, but they lack the means to discuss it with others from a Christian perspective and so lack the guidance of the wider body of Christ.

If we don't enjoy a supportive Christian community, then over time our sense of Christian identity can begin to wane, and our thinking and behaviour can become more like the pattern of this world. We become gradually weaker in our standards and neutralised in our Christian influence. We begin to think of ourselves as members of our organisation first, and Christians second, instead of Christians first and members of our organisation second.

So I want to invite you to talk about this and explore to what extent you have a supportive Christian community in order to support your Christian identity in your workplace.

Teaching

Every Christian stands at the intersection of three key relationships. First our relationship with God, second our relationship with the wider body of Christ, and thirdly our relationship with the world (which includes the workplace).



Our relationship with God is where our identity is sourced. Our relationship with the wider body of Christ is where our Christian identity is nurtured and developed. And our relationship with the world and workplace is where our identity is tested and proved.

The problem for many Christians in the workplace is that they lack sufficient support from the wider Christian community. Those who don't participate in a strong Christian community are like somebody trying to sit on a three-legged stool where one of the legs is missing.

Scripture says ‘...let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near’ (Hebrews 10:24-25).

New Testament teaching includes many ‘one another’ commands: love one another, serve one another, bear one another’s burdens, speak truth to one another, pray for one another, and so on. These commands are worked out in Christian community and they are relevant to supporting one another on the frontline of our lives in the world.

Being in a secular workplace can be a bit like being in exile. Daniel is an example of a believer in exile and he had three close friends: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (better known by the names they were given in Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). When they faced an awkward decision about eating food and wine allocated by the king (which would have defiled their Jewish identity), they decided to eat water and vegetables instead and managed to persuade the king’s official to let them try that diet for ten days as an experiment. The fact that they took this stance together suggests that they found some strength in their mutual support. If any one of them had been on their own it would have been more difficult to stand up for their identity and avoid the royal food and wine.

On another occasion when Daniel faced a tough and threatening challenge from

Nebuchadnezzar (who must be the original boss from hell) he went and talked to his friends and urged them to pray about it. ‘Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery’ (Daniel 2:17-18).

Jesus had some close friends with whom he would share his heart; Peter, James, and John. Even the Son of God, who was sure of his identity, gathered friends to support him personally in his ministry. As Christ followers we need to do the same.

There is no doubt that we are all out there on a frontline in the workplace and our Christian identity is being tested and challenged every day. The question for each of us is ‘are we experiencing support for our Christian identity in the workplace?’ Where are we getting support for the truth that our primary belonging is to Christ and not the organisation?

SESSION 3 Authenticity

Scene Setter

Welcome to our third session in this module on Christian identity, part of our series on *Growing as Disciples in Today's Workplace*. In the previous two sessions we looked at the topics of value and community. In this session we consider the issue of authenticity. How authentic are we as Christians in the workplace?

What does authenticity mean for a Christian? Well the Bible says that 'God anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts' (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). And the fruit of the Spirit is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23a). So to be authentic as a Christian is to model the character of Christ through the fruit of the Spirit. The origin of the word 'character' is a Greek word meaning 'stamping tool', which conveys the idea of replicating an image of something. To be authentic as a Christian is to reflect Christ, who was full of grace and truth.

Graciousness is winsome in many ways. People who are peaceful and kind are attractive people. People who have the ability to forgive others and give themselves in service to others are distinctively different. And in our relativistic world, there is something very interesting about people who have clear principles and values. Modelling

the character of Jesus is Christian authenticity in practice.

But having strong personal beliefs has also become a problem in the workplace, because keeping your personal beliefs separate from your working relationships is usually regarded as desirable and necessary. That way we avoid any possible tension with customers or colleagues who may hold different views. So we live in a climate of political correctness that can suppress any expression of personal faith. This is where Christians can be tempted to hide, because it can be unpopular or unsafe to be open about our faith. In fact, in some public sector workplaces it has become illegal.

The popular assumption underneath all this is that your work is necessary to earn your living, and your faith is assumed to belong in your private, leisure time world. This is what some people call the 'sacred/secular divide'. Now that thinking marginalises your faith and that can subtly affect your identity, because you can compartmentalize yourself and 'put on a face' in the workplace, different from the one you present to your family or your church family. The public 'you' is masked and becomes different to the real 'you'.

Scripture says, 'Be holy because I am holy' (1 Peter 1:16). Part of the concept of holiness means being set apart. It also means being whole. For that to be true there must be some values and principles on which we are not

prepared to compromise. Authentic holiness has some values and boundaries. But when those values come up against the world's value system, there is tension and sometimes rejection.

Jesus said, 'If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me' (John 15:19-21).

Many years ago, it used to be the practice to bite a gold sovereign in order to test whether or not it was authentic. And that picture of testing something by putting it under pressure can apply to testing our authenticity as Christians. It's one thing to say that we believe in Jesus, it's another to be committed to following him when our faith causes rejection, because we do not follow the crowd.

Many workplaces have stated values that are very consistent with Christianity: values like integrity, doing the best for people, creativity, and so on. So on the surface some workplaces can feel as though they are a relatively easy place to be a Christian. But under the surface there are some other values, perhaps not openly stated, that present a challenge. Wealth is one of

those. We don't like to admit it, but many organizations exist to maximize the wealth of the leaders. That is not the only reason they exist, but it is an important reason. The ratio between how much the leaders earn and how much people at the lowest level earn can be enormous. Jesus said you cannot serve both God and Mammon, but Mammon seems to be alive and well in a lot of workplaces.

So our experiences of being authentic about our faith may be both positive and negative. Let's explore this issue now in our discussion.

Teaching

When the Jews were exiled to Babylon, they had to live in an alien culture over 1000 miles from their home. That made their identity and authenticity a big issue and we can learn a lot from studying characters who were in exile.

Daniel, who was exiled in Babylon, is a great example of someone who never compromised his true identity on his frontline, but neither was he 'in your face' about it. He was open but not naïve. The book of Daniel shows him adopting a non-confrontational, conciliatory attitude and exercising diplomacy and tact. He wasn't drawn into a ghetto mentality in exile, so he was ready to engage with the alien culture without being absorbed by it or losing his distinctiveness. He kept his commitment to God and won the respect even of King Nebuchadnezzar.

I have a feeling that Daniel's godly character, which is itself powerful evidence of authenticity, was so evident in his life that when he did take a stand on an issue, his character had already won the battle. His involvement in Babylonian society with his transparent God-given identity was done in a quiet, yet confident way. Neil Anderson says, 'Humility is confidence properly placed in God, not ourselves.' Daniel was confident in God, and that was what gave him the calm ability to live and work as an authentic believer in an ungodly environment.

Probably the most famous example in Scripture of a believer failing to be authentic was when Peter denied that he knew Christ, just before Jesus' trial and crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62). The accusation to Peter in the courtyard was, 'Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.' What was really being challenged was his affiliation to Jesus. It was fear that caused Peter to try to hide his identity when he felt under pressure, fear that made him deny Jesus.

In stark contrast to Peter are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the court of Babylon, refusing to bow down to the king's gold statue and as a result being thrown into the blazing furnace. Their faith caused them to set a personal boundary in obedience to God and they would not cross it to worship an idol. 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing

furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up' (Daniel 3:16-18). This is an example of how authenticity is proved when the fear of God is greater than the fear of man. On this occasion God did rescue them spectacularly, which turned out to be a great witness to their boss!

Some years ago I interviewed a man for a job and it became clear he was a good candidate. Towards the end of the interview, he told me he was an Orthodox Jew and explained that he had to be back in his North London Jewish community by sundown on Fridays to observe the Sabbath. To achieve this in winter, he would have to leave work shortly after lunch to have enough time for the commute. Although he was clearly nervous about telling me this, he promised that he would make up the time and asked if it would be possible. The guy was for real and I agreed. He was so grateful – and I cannot remember anyone I ever employed who worked as hard as he did. When he left on Fridays, nobody else in the team batted an eyelid. They wished him well. His authenticity had paid off.

When bank tellers are trained to spot counterfeits, they are not given counterfeit currency, instead they are given the true currency to handle and study and so they

get to know every aspect of it intimately. Then, if they encounter a forgery, they know it instinctively – even perhaps before being able to define what exactly is wrong. It just doesn't 'feel right'. In the same way, if we practice spiritual disciplines like Bible study and prayer – things that deepen our intimacy with God – this helps to create a stronger Christian identity and we become more authentic in the process.

We also refine our authenticity by being willing to be engaged with the world and not withdrawn. It is on the daily frontline of work that we get the opportunities and the risks of being active in demonstrating the grace and truth of Christ. So we have to be willing to get involved with people and situations that are sometimes uncomfortable. We don't always have to speak of Jesus to have the distinctiveness of Jesus. Kindness and compassion, truthfulness and trustworthiness, are distinctive in themselves. In fact, one of the best ways to start a spiritual conversation in today's workplace is to live such an authentic and distinctively different life that people ask you questions about why you are the way you are.

SESSION 4 Resilience

Scene Setter

Welcome to our fourth and final session in this module on Christian Identity, part of our series on *Growing as Disciples in Today's Workplace*. So far in this module we've looked at the topics of value, community, and authenticity. Today we are considering the challenge of being able to stand firm as a Christian, even when the going gets tough.

Identity relies on memory. In the Old Testament the Jewish festivals were designed to help the nation of Israel remember their past and their unique identity. The sacrament of the Lord's supper has a similar function for us now – to remember Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf and how we are now in relationship with God through him. When we remember something we 're-member' it: in other words we reintroduce it into our present experience. That is why memories both trigger emotions and influence our sense of identity and our behaviour today.

Having a resilient identity enables us to stand firm when put in situations that might make us compromise our values. In difficult or pressured situations, or when tempted, psychologically resilient people remember who they are and keep their integrity. So a key part of being resilient as a Christian is remembering our relationship to God in Christ, because as we remember that, we

are more likely to remain faithful, even in challenging circumstances.

'For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children' (Romans 8:14-16).

When we are under pressure, we are often tempted to believe that the easy way out is an acceptable way – even if it goes against our values and boundaries. Language like 'shading the truth' is used as a euphemism to make something sound more acceptable. But the resilient Christian spots the lie, submits to God, resists the temptation, and keeps their integrity. This is spiritual warfare and the 'armour of God' (Ephesians 6:10-18) is part of how God helps us to do this.

When an elastic band is stretched to the full, there comes a point where it will not stretch any more. There is a boundary on what it can do, and if more force is applied, the band will break. Something similar is true of people. We can adapt to some stresses and strains, but there comes a point, a boundary, where we can go no further. We need to know and recognize those boundaries.

As a Christian we might feel a bit 'stretched' in places where people use language or jokes that we find inappropriate. Being

tested like this is part of the normal tension of living in the world. But, if we are invited to lie or steal, or conduct an inappropriate relationship, or if we are asked to work seven days a week indefinitely, we are being asked to stretch beyond our personal boundaries and we need courage to stand firm and say 'no'. Sometimes we can just feel deeply uncomfortable about something and we instinctively know a boundary has been reached, even if it takes some reflection to understand and say exactly why.

Our resilience can be weakened by things that happened to us in the past at work or in life in general. Some memories we have are painful. We may have an insensitive boss, be passed over for promotion, be ridiculed for our faith, we may feel not valued, or rejected, put down, or disappointed. If we don't deal with these hurts of the past, we can become resentful or bitter and that can easily affect the way we behave today. This impacts our resilience and indeed our authenticity, as we are more tempted to wear a mask to hide our Christian identity, or to say things that express resentment.

Dealing with this often involves forgiveness. As we have been forgiven, so we are commanded to forgive others and this applies as much in the workplace as anywhere else. It takes courage to bring a painful memory to the surface and forgive that person from the heart in order to be healed. But forgiveness is a key element of maintaining a resilient Christian identity.

Let's consider some questions about being resilient as a Christian at work.

Teaching

Resilience is something that can only be proved over time. To be resilient means responding well to the past and having the right attitude towards the future.

As Christians we have a long-term perspective. We know that the Spirit of Jesus will never leave us, the unconditional love of God is always with us, and that Jesus will return. This assurance makes us more resilient. We have an indestructible hope – a hope that even after death we will be resurrected, and we will be with God forever. Hope makes a huge difference in times of testing.

As Scripture says, '...I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:38-39).

This confident hope in God is especially important when we fail. When we pull our elastic band beyond its limits it snaps. We fail in some way and then, as a Christian, we can feel like a fraud.

In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the younger son took his inheritance and squandered it, betraying his identity as a true son of his father. But when he came

to his senses he turned back to his father and said, 'I am not worthy to be called your son'. And then the father immediately reconfirmed his sonship. We may feel our identity has been irreversibly wrecked by failure, but as soon as we repent and come back to God, he restores it through his grace. God's unconditional forgiveness for, and acceptance of, those who trust in Christ is the bedrock of our resilience as believers. Success or failure are not what determine our identity, God's grace is. As the Bible says, 'The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms' (Deuteronomy 33:27).

Probably the best-known example of a failure to have resilient identity is the apostle Peter, who denied Jesus three times just before Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Yet after his resurrection, Jesus restored Peter. He was reinstated not only as a disciple, but as the leader of the church at that time. That humbling experience would have developed Peter as a resilient Christian – a person able to confess failure, receive forgiveness, and immediately get back up as a child of God. A resilient Christian knows how to come back from failure.

As well as being able to recover from failures or hurts in the past, the resilient Christian in God-dependent. Circumstances may be tough, but God in us is tougher:

'...we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from

God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed' (2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

To keep our hope and our dependency on God active and strong we need both a close relationship with God and the support and encouragement of the wider Christian community.

In an earlier session we covered the idea that the Christian needs three key relationships: relationship with God, with the Christian community, and with the wider world (which includes the workplace). Keeping a balance in these relationships is vital to being resilient, because our identity is strengthened when there is a good balance. If we withdraw from the world, then our faith becomes introverted, and we lose the imperative to be salt and light. If we disconnect from a Christian community we become 'lone rangers' out on the frontline with no support structure around us, more prone to spiritual attack. And if we allow our relationship with God to 'go cold', then our Christianity becomes simply social and lacks any distinctive qualities of the Spirit. Healthy and

resilient Christian identity engages with God, with the Christian community, and with the world.

Becoming resilient is part teaching and part experience. The Bible encourages us with the story of people of faith who have gone before us and faced enormous challenges:

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with endurance (that is resilience) the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of the faith.'

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

A focus on Jesus is the key.

May God bless you as you continue to look to him.