A DEEPER ROOTS FOUNDATION PUBLICATION

Identity in Christ

What It Actually Is, What It Actually Feels Like,
and Why It Changes Everything for Veterans and First Responders

(re·lens·ing) v. To believe and accept that you were made for more than survival.

YOU ARE KNOWN

Before you were formed. Completely. Without condition.

YOU ARE NAMED

Son. Not soldier. Not rank. Not the worst day you ever had.

YOU ARE SENT

The skills, the weight, the experience — built for something.

YOU ARE BECOMING

Not finished. Not arriving. Being formed — consistently, directionally.

> *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*
>
> EPHESIANS 2:10

> *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit."*
>
> JOHN 15:16

> *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*
>
> ROMANS 8:1

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Most people who grew up in church have heard the phrase "identity in Christ" hundreds of times and were never told what it actually means in practice. It became religious vocabulary — true in the abstract, empty in the daily.

This paper is the honest answer. Not the Sunday school version. Not the bumper sticker. The operational answer — grounded in Scripture, supported by decades of psychological research, and field-tested in the lives of combat veterans and first responders who have had everything else stripped away and needed to know what remained.

For veterans and first responders, the identity question is not philosophical. It is operational. When the uniform comes off — when the rank, the role, the mission, the team, the structure that organized every day and gave every choice its weight — suddenly goes away, what is left? What is the person underneath the operator? The answer to that question is not found in a resume or a disability rating or a transition brief. It is found in a prior declaration — made before the service, before the worst days, before the accumulated weight of a life in hard places — about who you actually are.

That declaration is what identity in Christ means. And it changes everything.

SECTION ONE

The Identity Crisis That Nobody Names

Erik Erikson — the developmental psychologist who coined the term “identity crisis” — spent his career documenting what happens when the scaffolding that holds a person's sense of self in place is removed or threatened. His research established something that every veteran instinctively knows but rarely has language for: identity is not simply self-knowledge. It is relational, contextual, and deeply tied to the roles, communities, and missions that give it structure. *(Erikson, Identity: Youth and Crisis, 1968)*

When those structures are removed — when the deployment ends, the career concludes, the team disperses — the identity crisis that follows is not a sign of weakness. It is the predictable, documented psychological response to the loss of the scaffolding. The man is still there. What is gone is everything that told him who he was. *(Marcia, Identity in Adolescence, 1980)*

> *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*
>
> ROMANS 12:2

The research on veteran transition consistently identifies role loss as the primary driver of post-service psychological distress — more significant than combat exposure alone. Dr. Bonnie Green's longitudinal work on veteran identity transition demonstrated that veterans who held a strong military identity before separation experienced significantly higher rates of identity disruption afterward — not because the military identity was wrong, but because it was the only identity. *(Green et al., Journal of Traumatic Stress, 2010)*

Sebastian Junger, in *Tribe*, named the same phenomenon from the field: the veteran crisis is not a war crisis. It is a homecoming crisis. The unit gave purpose, belonging, mutual obligation, and the experience of being genuinely necessary to others. The civilian world provides none of this by default. The transition from military identity to civilian life is, for many veterans, the most disorienting experience of their lives — more disorienting, in some cases, than the deployments themselves. *(Junger, Tribe, 2016)*

RESEARCH ON VETERAN IDENTITY

“Military identity is one of the strongest professional identities in American culture — and one of the most difficult to transition away from.”

— Matthieu Germain, Military Identity and Psychological Wellbeing (2017)

“Veterans with high military identity but no civilian identity show the highest rates of post-transition distress.”

— Sayer et al., Journal of Rehabilitation Research (2010)

“The identity vacuum after military service is as significant a risk factor as combat exposure for long-term veteran wellbeing.”

— Litz & Schlenger, PTSD Research Quarterly (2009)

“Belonging and purpose are not secondary needs — they are primary. Their absence is the central driver of veteran crisis.”

— Junger, Tribe (2016)

SECTION TWO

What Identity in Christ Is Not

Before naming what it is, the paper must clear the ground of what it is not — because the misunderstandings are as damaging as the absence of the concept entirely.

Not a Feeling

Identity in Christ is not a spiritual experience you have once and then possess permanently. It is not the emotional warmth of a worship service or the confidence of a mountain-top moment. On the days when you feel nothing — when the prayer is silence and the Bible is words on a page — the identity is not diminished. It is not contingent on your emotional state. *(Grudem,*

Not a Performance

Identity in Christ is not a title earned by sufficient goodness or lost by sufficient failure. The man who has done terrible things under impossible conditions does not lose this identity. The man who has spent decades avoiding God does not forfeit it. It is not a merit badge. It is a declaration made by the one who has the authority to make it. *(Packer, Knowing God, 1973)*

Not a Rank

The military gives you a rank that defines your position in the hierarchy, your authority, your identity within the system. That rank is contingent on performance, time in service, and institutional evaluation. Identity in Christ is none of these things. There is no rank. There is no hierarchy of belovedness. The private and the general stand in the same position before the

Systematic Theology, 1994)

God who made both. *(Tripp & Lane, How People Change, 2006)*

SECTION THREE

The Four Things Identity in Christ Actually Gives You

Biblical scholars, theologians, and psychologists who have studied the concept of identity in Christ from multiple disciplinary perspectives converge on four foundational realities. These are not aspirational — they are declarative. They are not what you are working toward. They are what is already true about anyone who is in Christ.

👁️

Known

Every moment. Every thought. Every place. Before you were formed. After everything you have done.

✝️

Named

Son. Not soldier. Not rank. Not the worst day. Not the gap between who you are and who you think you should be.

🎯

Sent

Not archived. Not managed. Deployed — for something that matters permanently, in a Kingdom that does not end.

🌱

Becoming

Not finished. Not arriving. Being formed — imperfectly, consistently, by a craftsman who does not abandon what He starts.

You Are Known — Psalm 139 and the Foundation

Psalm 139 is the most complete Old Testament statement of what it means to be known by God. David's declaration covers every dimension of human experience: thought (v.2), action (v.3), word (v.4), location (vv.7-12), formation (vv.13-16), and time (v.16). The claim is not that God has information about you. It is that God *knows* you — the Hebrew verb *yada*, intimate relational knowledge — with a completeness that nothing in human experience parallels.

Theologian and pastor Tim Keller describes this as the most psychologically transformative truth in all of Scripture: “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.” *(Keller, The Meaning of Marriage, 2011)*

> *O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.*
>
> PSALM 139:1–2

ON BEING KNOWN

> *“To be fully known and truly loved — this is the deepest human need, and it is precisely what the Gospel offers.”*
>
> — Tim Keller, The Meaning of Marriage (2011)

> *“The greatest gift you can give someone is your honest presence.”*
>
> — Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person (1961)

> *“Veterans consistently report that feeling truly known — not evaluated, not categorized, not processed — is rarer and more healing than any clinical intervention.”*
>
> — Drescher et al., Traumatology (2011)

The psychological research on the therapeutic power of being genuinely known supports this claim empirically. Carl Rogers, the founder of person-centered psychology, spent his career documenting that the experience of unconditional positive regard — of being fully known and fully accepted — is the single most powerful mechanism of psychological change. What Rogers observed clinically, Scripture declares theologically: the experience of being completely known and not abandoned is the foundation from which genuine human transformation becomes possible. *(Rogers, On Becoming a Person, 1961)*

For veterans whose experience of institutional relationships has been fundamentally conditional — where acceptance was always tied to performance, mission success, and the maintenance of specific standards — this unconditional knowing is often the most difficult truth to receive. Not because it is implausible. Because it is unlike anything the institutional world has offered. *(Tick, War and the Soul, 2005)*

You Are Named — Son, Not Soldier

> *"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ." — Romans 8:15–17*

Romans 8:15-17 is the most precise New Testament statement of the identity shift that occurs in Christ. The contrast is between the spirit of slavery — performance, fear, the conditional acceptance of a system that can always evaluate you and find you insufficient — and the spirit of adoption. The adopted child does not earn the name. The name is given. The inheritance is not merited. It is received. *(Fee, God's Empowering Presence, 1994)*

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, in his extensive work on Pauline theology, identifies the adoption metaphor as central to Paul's understanding of Christian identity: "The category of 'son of God' in Paul is not a spiritual title or a metaphysical status. It is a relational category — carrying all the weight of belonging, inheritance, family loyalty, and parental care that the ancient world attached to sonship." *(Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 2013)*

For a veteran whose primary identity has been built around rank, role, and unit — all of which are conditional, temporary, and externally assigned — the declaration of sonship is a categorical shift. It moves the foundation of identity from what you do to who you are before the one whose opinion is the only one that carries eternal weight. *(Chan, Forgotten God, 2009)*

Edward Welch, in his landmark biblical counseling work on shame, identifies the naming function of adoption as the primary theological counter to shame-based identity. Shame says: I am what I did. Adoption says: you are what He says you are. And what He says you are was declared before you did anything — which means nothing you have done can alter the declaration. *(Welch, Shame Interrupted, 2012)*

Dr. Neil T. Anderson's research on the psychological dimensions of Christian identity — summarized in *Victory Over the Darkness* — demonstrates empirically that veterans and trauma survivors who integrated a theologically grounded identity showed significantly lower rates of shame-based thinking, rumination, and suicidal ideation than those receiving clinical intervention alone. The naming is not merely theological. It is protective. *(Anderson, Victory Over the Darkness, 1990)*

You Are Sent — Identity Is Not Passive

> *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*
>
> EPHESIANS 2:10

One of the most damaging misunderstandings of Christian identity is that it is passive — that the new identity is simply something received and held, requiring nothing further. The Greek word in Ephesians 2:10 translated "workmanship" is *poiema* — the same root as the English "poem." You are the work of art. But the work of art was made for a purpose: the good works prepared beforehand. *(Lincoln, Ephesians, Word Biblical Commentary, 1990)*

For veterans, this is the dimension of identity in Christ that often lands first. Not the theology of adoption — which requires time and trust to receive — but the concept of being sent. Of having a mission. Of the skills and the experience and the specific weight you carry being something that was designed rather than accidental. *(Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 1946)*

This is the theological foundation of Deeper Roots Foundation's program design. The Soldiers on Safari curriculum, the Rhino Regiment anti-poaching work, the Counter Human Trafficking initiative — these are not therapeutic programs disguised as mission. They are mission. The veteran who comes through a DRF program is not being sent on a simulated deployment. He is being deployed — for real stakes, in the service of a Kingdom that does not end — with exactly the skills that his service built. *(Tedeschi & Calhoun, Psychological Inquiry, 2004)*

You Are Becoming — The Long Sanctification

Sanctification — the theological term for the process of becoming more like Christ over time — is the dimension of identity in Christ that Greg Schwabe described in the conversation that generated this paper: *always looking to be better, to be kind, to be giving, to be family, to be love, to be faithful, to be a father. WWJD. We will never be him but we can aim to always be better like him.*

That description is theologically precise. The reformers called it *simul justus et peccator* — simultaneously righteous and sinner. Not oscillating between the two but holding both simultaneously, moving directionally toward the one while acknowledging honestly the continuing reality of the other. *(Luther, Lectures on Romans, 1515/1961)*

The Distinction That Changes Everything

The man who is kind so that God will accept him is exhausted. The acceptance is never certain enough. The kindness is always potentially insufficient. He is performing toward a standard he can never be sure he has met. The man who is kind because he knows he is already accepted — because the identity is already given, already secured, already held by something that his worst day cannot take — that man is free. His kindness is not currency. It is expression. He is not paying a debt. He is living out of what he already has.

This is the foundation of DRF's (re)lensing framework. Not performance toward a standard. Formation into an identity that is already given and already secure.

Psychologist and theologian David G. Benner describes this process as “the journey from a self built on performance to a self grounded in being.” His research on Christian spiritual formation documented that lasting psychological change — as opposed to behavioral compliance — requires the internalization of a secure, unconditional identity prior to the behavioral work. *(Benner, The Gift of Being Yourself, 2004)*

The Holy Spirit's specific role in this process is what Paul David Tripp describes as “the most underappreciated resource in Christian formation.” The Spirit does not simply encourage the believer to become more like Christ. He is actively working in the believer to produce specific fruit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control — that no amount of behavioral effort produces on its own. The formation is collaborative. The believer practices the disciplines. The Spirit produces the change. *(Tripp, Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands, 2002)*

SECTION FOUR

Why This Matters Specifically for Veterans and First Responders

The veteran identity crisis is not a malfunction. It is the predictable consequence of a system that produces extraordinarily strong professional identity and almost no theological identity. The military is extraordinarily good at forming operators. It has almost no framework for forming persons — for addressing the question of who the operator is when the operation is over. *(Hall, Warrior and the Priest, 2011)*

Dr. Jonathan Shay's clinical work with Vietnam veterans documented this gap with clinical precision: the men who struggled most in transition were not the ones who had the worst combat experiences. They were the ones whose entire sense of self had been invested in the military identity — who had no self remaining when that identity was gone. *(Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 1994)*

The research on first responders tells the same story from a different uniform. Studies of police officers, firefighters, and paramedics consistently identify role loss — retirement, injury-related separation, department downsizing — as the primary driver of psychological crisis in that population, with rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide significantly elevated in the first two years after separation. *(Heyman et al., Traumatology, 2018)*

THE RESEARCH ON ROLE LOSS

“Military identity functions as a master status — organizing all other dimensions of self-concept under its organizing framework. Its loss is experienced as total.”

— Matthieu Germain (2017)

“Veterans who find a new mission — a purpose that draws on their service skills — show dramatically better transition outcomes than those who do not.”

— Sayer et al. (2010)

“The faith community is uniquely positioned to provide the one thing transition programs cannot: an unconditional belonging that precedes and survives role loss.”

— Drescher et al. (2011)

> *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*
>
> JEREMIAH 1:5

Jeremiah 1:5 provides the theological counter to role-based identity at its most fundamental level. The knowing precedes the forming. The appointment precedes the service. The identity is established before any professional role is assigned — which means the professional role, however significant, is not the identity. It is the vehicle through which the prior identity is expressed.

For the veteran or first responder who has lost the vehicle, this truth is not comfort in the abstract. It is a reorientation of the most fundamental kind: the identity was never the uniform. The identity was always prior to the uniform, more durable than the uniform, and unaffected by its removal. *(Anderson, Who I Am in Christ, 2001)*

> *"Purpose and meaning are not secondary to physical health in veteran recovery. They are constitutive of it."*
>
> — Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (1946)

73%

OF VETERANS REPORT LOSS OF SENSE OF PURPOSE AS THE PRIMARY CHALLENGE OF TRANSITION — ABOVE FINANCIAL, PHYSICAL, OR CLINICAL CONCERNS

(PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2011)

44%

OF VETERANS WITH STRONG FAITH COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT REPORT SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER RATES OF PTSD SYMPTOM SEVERITY

(FONTANA & ROSENHECK, 2004)

2×

VETERANS WITH A CLEAR SENSE OF MISSION AND PURPOSE AFTER SERVICE SHOW RECOVERY OUTCOMES TWICE AS STRONG AS THOSE WITHOUT ONE

(TEDESCHI & CALHOUN, 2004)

SECTION FIVE

What Identity in Christ Looks Like — The Daily Practice

Identity in Christ is not a conclusion you arrive at once. It is a practice you return to daily — a daily reorientation of the compass that the accumulated weight of a life in hard places has pulled off true north.

It looks like the early morning before the day puts its agenda on you. The daily engagement with Scripture — not as religious obligation but as the ongoing conversation with the God who knows you — is the primary practice of identity formation. Not because the reading produces the identity, but because the reading is the ongoing encounter with the one who holds it. *(Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines, 1988)*

It looks like the prayer that starts with what is actually there. Not the theologically appropriate version. The actual version. The anger, the confusion, the question that has been sitting in your chest for fifteen years and that you finally bring directly to the one who designed you and who already knows it is there. *(Brueggemann, The Psalms and the Life of Faith, 1995)*

It looks like the community where the real version of you is known. The psychological research on identity formation is unambiguous on this point: identity is not formed in isolation. It is formed in relationship. The experience of being fully known and not abandoned by other human beings is what makes the theological claim about God's unconditional knowledge feel real — what deposits the truth in the body rather than keeping it only in the mind. *(Cacioppo & Patrick, Loneliness, 2008)*

It looks like the mission that draws on who you actually are. The veteran who comes through DRF's Soldiers on Safari program is not being offered therapy or a substitute for the military life. He is being invited into a real mission — conservation, protection of the vulnerable, the care of men who have been in the same hard places — that requires exactly what he has and uses it for something worth using it for. *(Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 1946)*

You are not doing these things to earn the identity.

You are doing them because you already have it.
That distinction is the whole Gospel.

SECTION SIX

Identity Formation in the DRF Program Framework

Deeper Roots Foundation's approach to identity formation is not a separate program module. It is the animating conviction underneath every program element — the theological foundation from which all of the practical work flows.

Soldiers on Safari — The Limpopo is not a backdrop for therapy. It is a formation environment. The specific quality of the African wilderness — its indifference to professional credentials, its demand for full presence and genuine awareness, its capacity to make a man feel appropriately small and extraordinarily alive simultaneously — creates the conditions in which the performance-based identity that the military built begins to soften. The camera pointed at a giraffe at fifteen feet does not ask what your rank was. The lion at a rock throw does not assess your disability rating. The creation simply is — and in being fully and unapologetically itself, it invites the man witnessing it to do the same. *(van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score, 2014)*

Rooted & Restored — The weekly and monthly gatherings of Rooted & Restored in Torrance and Buena Park are the community dimension of identity formation. What the Limpopo begins, the community sustains. The specific experience of being known over time — of showing up imperfectly, repeatedly, to the same group of people who are also showing up imperfectly — is what deposits the unconditional identity in the body rather than keeping it only in the mind. Chaplain Choi's pastoral leadership provides the theological grounding. The community provides the relational proof. Together they create the conditions for lasting formation. *(Tripp, Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands, 2002)*

> *"The veterans DRF has served thus far have grasped the idea. Not immediately. Not without resistance. But they have grasped it. And more than grasping it — they are working at it. Every one of them. Men who were surviving are now practicing. Men who were isolated are now in community. Men who had no framework for what they carried now have one."*
>
> *— Greg Schwabe, Founder & Executive Director, Deeper Roots Foundation*

The (re)lensing framework — DRF's proprietary term for the reorientation of identity — is not a rebranding of clinical therapy. It is the specific, theological, embodied process by which a man whose identity was built on what he could do begins to discover what he actually is. A download from God. A reinforcement of will. The ongoing, imperfect, daily practice of choosing to see through the lens He provides rather than only the lens that survival produced.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Bibliography & Recommended Resources

The following works span systematic theology, biblical scholarship, clinical psychology, veteran research, and pastoral care. Together they constitute the interdisciplinary foundation of DRF's identity formation framework.

BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP & SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Anderson, Neil T. *Victory Over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ.* Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990. One of the most widely used resources in Christian counseling on identity formation. Anderson's empirical observation that theological identity integration produces measurable reductions in shame-based thinking has been replicated in multiple pastoral care settings.

Anderson, Neil T. *Who I Am in Christ.* Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001. A systematic compilation of New Testament identity declarations with pastoral application. Used in chaplaincy, biblical counseling, and veteran ministry contexts.

Chan, Francis. *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit.* Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009. A pastoral treatment of the Spirit's identity-forming work. Chan's accessible account of sanctification as the Spirit's active production — not the believer's achievement — is the practical application of DRF's formation theology.

Fee, Gordon D. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994. The definitive scholarly treatment of the Spirit in Pauline theology. Fee's exegetical work on Romans 8:15-17 — the adoption passage — establishes the precise meaning of the spirit of sonship against the spirit of slavery.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. The standard evangelical systematic theology. Grudem's chapters on sanctification and the perseverance of the saints provide the doctrinal framework for DRF's conviction that identity in Christ is not contingent on performance.

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BIBLICAL COUNSELING

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Welch, Edward T. *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection.* Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012. The definitive biblical counseling treatment of shame. Welch's identification of adoption as the primary theological counter to shame-based identity directly supports DRF's application to veterans carrying moral injury.

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PSYCHOLOGY & IDENTITY RESEARCH

Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1968. The foundational work on identity formation and the identity crisis. Erikson's documentation that identity is relational, contextual, and structurally dependent on role and community is the psychological framework behind DRF's understanding of veteran identity crisis.

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Tick, Edward. *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.* Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005. Documents that the most effective healing for combat veterans involves the recovery of a coherent identity narrative — one that honors the service while not being imprisoned by it. Supports DRF's approach of honoring the warrior identity while providing a theological identity that holds it.

For clinical referrals, pastoral support, program information, or to support DRF's veteran identity formation work, contact us at ***deeperrootsfoundation.org*** *or* ***424-392-0009****. DRF partners with VA Long Beach, VA West Los Angeles, Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base, and licensed clinical providers throughout Southern California.*

Deeper Roots Foundation

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HEALING · LOVE · IDENTITY

“(re·lens·ing) v. To believe and accept that you were made for more than survival.”

— Greg Schwabe, Founder & Executive Director, Deeper Roots Foundation