

A person's silhouette stands on a grassy hill under a starry night sky. A bright meteor streaks across the sky. The text 'OUR DIVINE IDENTITY' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the upper half of the image.

OUR
DIVINE
IDENTITY

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CHAPTER 1

We Are Children of God

Galatians 3:26

Early in the process of the restoration of the gospel, Joseph Smith articulated a difficulty common to all men—particularly members of the Church. He used the idea of a fence as a metaphor to describe the challenge. He said: “The great thing for us to know is to comprehend what God did institute before the foundation of the world, [but] who knows it? It is the constitutional disposition of mankind *to set up stakes and set bounds* to the works and ways of the Almighty.”⁶ By stakes, Joseph had in mind large posts that stick into the earth and across which lay rails or boards to make a fence.

FENCES

According to the metaphor, the purpose of the fence is to keep out any truth or teaching that contradicts commonly held beliefs or traditions. Additionally, he warned, “I say to all those who are disposed to set up stakes for the Almighty, you will come short of the glory of God. To become a joint heir of the heirship of the Son, one must put away all his false tradition.”⁷

To effectively put away false traditions, many of which we cannot currently see, we must identify any of our beliefs that are incorrect and accept all truth. However, in doing so, we are warned against rejecting anything which God has revealed through His prophets; His prophet’s words are to remain sacrosanct. “I never heard of a man [or woman] being damned for believing too much,” said the Prophet, “but they are damned for unbelief.”⁸ The directive to keep our minds wide open to all sources of truth, while filtering out the thoughts

and beliefs which are incorrect—and while accepting the words of living prophets—is both empowering and sobering. It is empowering because it gives each of us liberty of conscience to believe all kinds of things, without being condemned by the Lord, as we sort out true beliefs from false ones. On the other hand, failure to accept even a small portion of that which the Lord has revealed makes all the difference between enlightenment and condemnation—between finding truth or remaining in the dark at noonday.

The Lord’s revelations to the prophets provides us with guideposts in our search for truth. His commandments are meant to help us discern truth from error and enable us to accept much more truth than we currently do while laying aside beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets that fence error into our minds. Some stakes can be so deeply dug that they do not come out easily—or at once. Indeed, some of our mental fencing can be more like the Berlin Wall, layered with barbed wire, and watched over by men with guns. To go near some of our fences with the intent to take them down can invite an array of protective and defensive maneuvers. Nevertheless, as was the case with the Berlin Wall, all fences can come down if we can find the right tools for the job. The tool to remove the stakes from our minds that block us from receiving all truth is a mental construct called identity.

IDENTITY

The word “identity” is used in many different contexts. It is an idea or concept that you find at the center of multiple academic and professional disciplines. In simple terms, identity is the mental construct we hold of ourselves, oftentimes unarticulated, which gives us our sense of purpose and belonging.⁹ It is developed by the stories we tell ourselves,¹⁰ stories based upon a belief that we are either worthy of redemption or are contaminated emotions serving no ultimate purpose.¹¹ It is the sum total of “qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance, and/or expressions that characterize a person or group.”¹² A person’s identity answers the question, “To whom or to what do I pledge my allegiance?” Depending on the person, the answers to that question

can be nuanced and take a variety of forms. Since World War II, much research has been conducted on the importance of identity in influencing behavior. Results across a host of disciplines tell the same story: Our identity influences both *what* we think and *how* we think and, therefore, is highly predictive of a person's behavior.

Identity research has shown the concept to be more complex than one might think. For one thing, identity is multi-faceted, meaning that our identities consist of many dimensions, or sub-identities, that reflect the myriad of ways that we present ourselves to the world. Each facet has associated attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors, which, when taken together, form a mental model¹³ or pattern that affects what we see around us. In general, the facets of our identities overlap around core beliefs and behaviors that allow us to be seen and experienced by others, with the multitude of identity facets reinforcing one another. However, oftentimes this is not the case, and our identities compete with one another for prominence in our lives. This is especially true when behavioral requirements are in conflict. Consider the teenager whose dancing talent and competitive dance club performance schedule contend with her family vacation schedule and her church's sabbath day worship. Each identity—that of dance team member, family member, and religious observer—has its own behavioral and attitudinal requirements. The identity she chooses to follow will be strengthened, while the others will be weakened. Sometimes parents intervene with behavioral compulsion, and through their methods, they unintentionally solidify a facet of their child's identity that they would rather weaken. It is important to note that identities are strengthened in the mind by choice, even if a person cannot act upon them freely.

The concept of diversity relates to the discussion of individual identity. In the term's broadest sense, diversity results from individuals possessing multi-faceted identities. It is from the many facets of our identity that we show up differently to one another and through which our many gifts can be expressed. I believe this variety is one of the great gifts of our Heavenly Father to the world—a gift that challenges us to apply the saving doctrines of the gospel of

Jesus Christ and that invites us to be like Him. So many of our challenges in life are a result of us clumsily, and sometimes unwillingly, dealing with the individual diversity that surrounds us. Additionally, diversity can become a separate facet of identity—a facet complete with beliefs and behaviors that compete with the other facets for our attention. In this sense, diversity is not a gift but a type of mental fence that can keep us from enjoying all that God wishes us to enjoy.

Beyond the multi-faceted aspects, our identities are also contextual. This means that depending on our context, certain identities assume an ascendant position relative to their counterparts and the associated behaviors and mindsets are manifest in kind. Some of these contexts were developed in our youth, so when we go home to visit family, for instance, and socialize with those who knew us, say, as a “kid brother,” or “comedian,” we choose to accommodate such contexts by reverting to a familiar storyline that dictates how we speak and act. We discover these identities over the passage of a few years as we mature and our relationships to our family members change. Other contexts, however, have long traditions and histories associated with them, and we can no longer see how immersed we are in them. Nationality, race, and ethnic or cultural heritage are examples of such facets of identity. These facets are more stable and change less frequently and dramatically, so our relationship to them and our choices about them can be more obscured—that is, until certain beliefs and behaviors are brought into conflict with our other facets of identity. As is the case with our family contexts, we likewise inherit these facets—facets that establish certain facts about us. With that said, such facts need not define how and what we think. We can make choices about the implications of these contexts and change our behavior accordingly.

Sometimes facets of our identity can trap us into relational patterns that are painful or difficult to change because of the strength of contextual cues. Strong family or ethnic cultures, for example, may have normative expectations that are very difficult to abandon because doing so may hurt another and we do not want to cause harm. Or sometimes we simply do not know how to live differently without sacrificing the behavioral and attitudinal expectations of the

contextual identity to which we no longer feel drawn. The appeal of contextual facets of identity can weaken or strengthen over time as we gain different life experiences and dealing with the implications of such changes can be very difficult to negotiate with friends and family members with whom we have shared so many memories and history. The reality of contextual change that we experience leads us to consider an additional facet of identity: fluidity.

Our identities are not static. Each is subject to change over time as we gain more experience in different contexts and learn new things. Sometimes information we learn invites us to adopt new facets that compete with the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of some of our existing facets of identity. When this happens, we have a choice to decide which facet is more important to us. The changing nature of our identity is very important because it means that we do not have to remain as we are. We can adopt new facets with accompanying beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and change our identity. It also means that beliefs and behaviors which today are very important to us might not remain so as we gain new experiences and learn new information. We also have the ability to deepen existing facets of identity—to drive mental stakes, as it were, more deeply into the ground through the same processes of learning and doing.

The fluidity of identity helps us pause when adopting assumptions of facets which may not be correct. This is particularly true with socially constructed facets, such as nationality, culture, and race. On its face, that last sentence may seem surprising—even lunatic—but consider that in our lifetimes we have seen the dissolutions of nations and institutions that shaped culture and imbibed meaning into their citizenry. The rapid dissolution of the Soviet Union left millions of people without a nation and suddenly free to identify with a new nationality. For many people around the world, nations—like their attending governments—rise and fall. The Catholic church, an institution rich in tradition and historically prescriptive in normative cultural requirements, no longer carries the same influence among its adherents generally nor in the nations that have long hosted so many of its parishioners. Even race, something that seems so absolute, is being reexamined for its complexity. As it

turns out, our terminology and institutions have done much to oversimplify what has always been an intricate and evolving part of each of us. Just browse through some old US census forms to see how the perception and categorization of race has changed in our lifetimes. Or visit a country such as Brazil or Argentina and witness literal melting pots of ethnic traditions, where citizens do not see race as a homogenous characteristic but rather as one ingredient in the alchemy of the individual.

As interesting as the first three facets of identity are—multi-faceted, contextual, and fluid—the last two aspects are perhaps the most significant: the facets of our identities are hierarchical and a function of moral agency. Let us consider the former first.

Facets of identity are hierarchical in that they compete with each other for primacy in our lives. One facet will always win out among all others and become primary to us. It is this facet of identity—our primary facet—that is absolutely essential to understand because the implications of it are so profound. This is because our primary facet is the facet through which all other facets are viewed. It carries with it real demands in thought and action. Our primary facet of identity is not mental accent. Adherents with similar primary facets of identity will reject anyone who is not completely and fully a member in thought and action. Compromise of viewpoints and behaviors will not be an option. It is the primary lens through which we see the world. It shades all of the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of our secondary and tertiary facets of identity. In this way, it acts like a type of optical filter (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Optical Filter



An optical filter is a device that selectively transmits light of different wavelengths, usually implemented as a glass plane or plastic device. Filters of this kind selectively transmit light in a particular range of wavelengths, or colors, while absorbing the remainder. The resulting color we see is determined by the filter in the primary or top position. Our primary identity facet works similarly in relation to the other facets of our identity, in that it colors and selectively shades the other facets. Any truth that passes through is only a particular wavelength and not the complete spectrum. It is a permeable, mental fence that sets the terms for what we see, think, and come to accept as true.

Selecting a facet of identity as primary does not mean it ceases to collaborate with other facets. Rather, it is through our primary facet of identity that we filter incoming information, interpret facts, and determine meaning. Our primary identity affects how and what we think by selecting the wall against which we lean our Ladders of Inference¹⁴ and is comparable to a mental model.¹⁵ We will discuss these concepts in detail in chapter 3.

Primary identity facets provide us with specific benefits. For example, certain professional facets of identity have been shown to protect individuals from anxiety and despair in the face of uncertainty. Consider a study of airline pilots facing organizational uncertainty during merger and acquisition announcements. The researchers conducting the study, concluded: “Despite their uncertainty and declining attitudes, the pilots continued to like their work and to be committed to it. . . . This is because they adopted a professional or occupational orientation instead of an organizational one.”¹⁶

The pilots accomplished this by “allowing priorities for professional affiliation help them reframe the importance of uncertainty about the employing organization . . . by re-evaluating the organizational ownership as less important than their professional identities—I’m a pilot, and that matters more than the company that employs me.” Pilots chose to place their identities as pilots above their identities as employees. Doing so helped them press forward in the face of uncertainty and be less concerned with seeking out information about the merger. Our primary facets of identity can make us resilient in the face of the unknown.

Another reason our primary facet of identity requires our allegiance is that it is the source from where we draw purpose and meaning for our lives. As a result, we choose to give everything we have over to this way of thinking and acting.

And that leads to the final point about identity—the most important point of all—identity is a function of moral agency.

PRIMARY IDENTITY AND MORAL AGENCY

We choose our primary facet of identity, along with every other facet of identity in our lives. We decide which facet will be primary and to which we will give our allegiance. *We decide*. This reality carries deep implications. It implies that regardless of our genetic, environmental, or spiritual inheritance, we decide which facet of identity will shape how we see the world and from which facet all of our actions will flow. We can determine how many facets of

identity we will adopt and determine the contexts in which those identities are exercised. We choose which facets we will strengthen and which we will weaken, and we choose which identity will be primary above all.

This is not to say that we choose the conditions of mortality that are genetically or environmentally inherited. For instance, someone who lives with same gender attraction did not choose to be gay. However, a gay person can and does choose how and to what extent his or her facet of identity as a gay person will interact with his or her other facets. The same is true for other inherited mortal conditions such as race, ethnicity, or physical health conditions. A Samoan man or woman, for example, arrives in mortality in a family with varying emphasis placed on his or her ethnic identity facet, but it is ultimately that person's choice as to what extent those beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors will influence his or her life relative to other competing facets.

It is because of our divine endowment of moral agency that we can avoid setting up mental stakes that block our acceptance of divine truth. And it is because of our moral agency that we correctly identify the influences in our lives that are not aligned with the truth flowing to and through the Lord's living servants the prophets.

Some writers have described the tension between the benefits flowing from our agency and the gospel requirement to be obedient as a paradox,¹⁷ but they acknowledge that it is through such paradoxes that one comes to know the truth.¹⁸ The key is to not let facets of identity that are filled with error or bad assumptions have sufficient sway over our thoughts and actions that we unintentionally reject truth before it can be fully manifest. We can, if we are not careful, be influenced by a primary facet of identity. As a result, we misinterpret certain frustrating conditions, short-change our access to truth, and stymie our spiritual development. We literally fence ourselves into a corner by our own choosing, becoming completely unaware of the limitations we have placed upon ourselves—limitations that keep us from the “fulness of truth” that our Heavenly Father wants us desperately to enjoy.¹⁹ Speaking on the importance of our agency to determine how and what we think, President Russell M. Nelson taught:

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