

Chaplain Identity – David A. Brady

Because the profession of chaplaincy has significant challenges in balancing ones spiritual life while providing spiritual resiliency to ones Soldiers, a chaplain must have an identity that is God centered, self-knowing and Soldier focused. In our stressful military world, we are often pushed and pulled in different ways. At times these ways can be contradictory to previous instructions or require clarification and negotiation to sort them out. It's fair to suggest that it can be demanding and even frustrating at times. Our identity grounds us in times like these but also tells us who and what we are.

To be God centered forms and guides our inner-self. As a Christian chaplain I look to the Bible to help form my identity as a chaplain. The Gospel of Matthew 22:36-39 asks and answers a very important question “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹ These verses run simultaneously in being God centered and Soldier focused. To be God centered clarifies purpose, mission and process. It removes self from the picture and directs our actions towards others. General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson reminded a chaplain, “You have a higher office than is in my power to bestow.”²

I knew since ninth grade, and wrote it in my yearbook, that I would be a chaplain. My identity was established through God's calling and I've always thought myself as one inside. To be clear, I knew my place and position in my military service prior to becoming a chaplain but imagine for a moment the reaction of my Marine Corps Drill Instructor asking me in flowery language what I was going to be when I grew up. “Sir,

I'm going to be a chaplain, Sir!" was not the answer he was expecting. Several chaplains mentored me, teaching valuable skills that would be expected of me both as a Soldier and a chaplain along the way, well before I commissioned. Those chaplains knew who they were, their purpose and were happy to guide. Whether a Christian or another tradition one should know the calling set before them.

In the chaplain's identity they must know themselves before others can know them. Infusing the call set before them into their own actions is key. They should be the leading expert in their specialty as a religious adviser to the staff, a pastor and a counselor. To be this person one should be infested in their tradition's books faith as well as their military regulations and field manuals.

Our spiritual formation as a chaplain is critical and should be trained as hard as our professional formation. Johann von Goethe tells us that "talent develops in solitude, character develops in the stream of life."³ This is a simple thought that reminds us that our character is what people see. It is who we are and what we are. "Chaplains immerse themselves in the experience of war – its methods, human costs and moral ambiguities – knowing in advance that they attempted something fundamentally impossible, yet necessary and highly important."⁴ The takeaway is to know yourself and "believe that a quiet, persistent, tender fidelity always wins the day."⁵

The last portion of chaplain identity is to be Soldier focused. Matthew 25:31-46 tells the parable of the sheep and goats. In short, it divides those that reached out to other and those who did not. Verses 35-36 says, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to

me.”⁶ The role of chaplain takes us to the flock with visitation, outreach, pastoral care, counseling and teaching.

Milton Haney a Civil War chaplain from the 55th Infantry, Illinois said, “A chaplain who would remain at headquarters and only be seen by the men in connection with a perfunctory “Divine service,” amounted to but little.”⁷ This is a strong admonition given by a chaplain who understood that neither the pulpit nor the staff office was where the chaplain truly ministered.

To love our neighbor as ourselves takes us into human interaction in the spiritual journey with our Soldiers and families. CH (COL) Paul Hurley points out “The underlying strength of Soldiers is their spirit or soul.”⁸ At time these interactions “confronts the ecclesiastical presuppositions about public ministry and attempts to frame these in relation to a secularized world beyond the ecclesiological identity of church where such frameworks logically belong.”⁹ This confrontation though is necessary. As I suggest, not everyone’s a Free Methodist but I need to meet the Soldier where he or she is.

The profession of chaplaincy has significant challenges in balancing ones spiritual life while providing spiritual resiliency to ones Soldiers. To do this a chaplain must have an identity that is God centered, self-knowing and Soldier focused. Anything short of that short changes the Soldier as they themselves seek and build their spiritual identity and formation. When we know our identity then act on it, we too can stand like Paul and say “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.”¹⁰

Notes

1. Matthew 22:36-39 (ESV).
2. Alonzo H Qunit, “*Potomac and the Rapidan*” (Crosby and Nichols, Boston, MA, 1864), 69.
3. Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Classic Sermons on the Love of God*” (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998), 153.
4. John W. Brinsfield, “*Faith in the Fight*” (Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2003), 27.
5. Charles A. Humphreys “*Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison in the Civil War, 1863-1865*” (George E. Ellis Company, Boston, MA, 1918), 23.
6. Matthew 25:35-36 (ESV).
7. Milton L. Haney “*Pentecostal Possibilities or Story of My Life*” (Christian Witness, Chicago, IL, 1906), 146.
8. CH (COL) Paul K. Hurley “*Sustaining Souls AWC Strategy Paper*” (United States Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2013), 9.
9. David Grulke “*The Search for Identity and Meaning in Army Chaplaincy*” (Australian Army Chaplaincy Journal, Summer edition, December 2013), 55.
10. Acts 26:19 (ESV).