

Faith, brand, and identity

By [David Williams](#)

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What is it that defines us, as beings? What gives cohesion to our sense of ourselves, and then establishes our relationship to others?

These questions were bopping around in my head the other day as I was walking the dog. They hovered about, like the summer gnats that flew around me in a cloud.

Two ways of understanding identity surfaced and played off of one another. On the one hand, identity as brand. On the other, faith.

Brand identity is the Big Buzzy Thing in our consumer culture. It used to be less all pervasive, less radically defining. I mean, shoot, back when I was a kid there was Tide and Ivory, Coke and Pepsi, Chevy and Ford, but those lived in their own domain. Now, with the net-driven commodification of all human interaction, we're all supposed to attend to our brand.

But what is this identity, that brand-focus creates within us? Brand is about the relationship between a product/service and a consumer of said product/service. It is intended to develop a pattern of repeat or customary purchase, based on the consumer's perception of qualitative dynamics of the brand.

I use Google products, for instance, like this blog platform, and Gmail, and my Chromebook. I use them because Google represents, for me, innovation coupled with an imperfect but intentional beneficence. I eat at Chipotle, because, again, there's a general focus on doing less harm, plus it's dang tasty and a heck of an option for non-carnivores like myself.

Brand does more than confer corporate identity. It rubs off, by intent, in the relation. The brands we consume are meant to modify our own sense of self, to be a social marker within culture as to our place and status.

I'm composing this on an iMac, which bears the Apple brand, as does my iPhone. That is meant to tell me that I have disposable income, that I am successful,

and—from the suite of creativity software bundled with the iMac—that I am part of the self-styled creative class. This is a good thing, because those folks are the only people still allowed to make a living in our culture.

Out in the carport and driveway, we have a Honda and a Toyota, which tell us that we are a practical, reliable, comfortably bourgeois family. The more we internalize the brands we interact with as shaping our own identity, the more we are embedded as a consistent and reliable consumer.

And so the question becomes: what is the relationship between brand identity and an identity shaped by faith?

It's an important question, because as branding becomes the defining feature of both corporate and individual self-understanding, there's bleed over into the realm of faith. Churches need to "think about their brand" in the process of the endless self-promotion we're now obligated to pursue. Our living out of spirituality together becomes both shaped and expressed in terms of the market ethic. Is that an issue?

Honestly, it is. Because faith shapes identity in ways that are radically different from brand.

Brand, after all, is about ownership and possession. It is driven by commodified self-interest. The point and purpose of branding is to promote the corporate or individual person being branded. While it creates relationship, that relationship is essentially grasping, oriented to benefit the brand itself.

And in that, brand identity is the inverse of the identity created by faith.

Faith is oriented not towards the self, but the self orienting itself towards a purpose that transcends self. Or the organization orienting itself towards a purpose that transcends organization. The *telos* created by faith—or at least, an existentially valid faith—challenges persons to be grounded in something that will continually demand their own growth. It is relation with the other rooted in the other.

An identity shaped by faith is a different thing, a different thing entirely, and that's worth keeping in mind before we press that hot metal against the surface of our souls.

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