

Christian Identity: Who You Are in Christ

Introduction to Christian Identity

“Who am I?” is one of the most significant questions in life. The answer to this question will determine nearly everything about you for your entire life. We must know who we are before we are ready to decide what we must do. Identity determines purpose.

People identify themselves with all sorts of things—families, careers, nations, regions, sports teams, schools, likes and dislikes, etc. Their personal identity—what they think of themselves—is directly related to these factors. Many things make up our identity.

Our society is bombarded with messages attempting to tell people who they are, what they should look like, how they should spend their money, and what success is.¹ Because of these competing messages, people often are confused about who they are or what they are supposed to be doing. With the culture’s emphasis on human individualism and autonomy (i.e., self-rule), people feel free to define and re-define themselves according to their latest whim, feeling, or fashion.

People today identify themselves in all sorts of odd and ridiculous ways. Fifty years ago, no one would have guessed that reasonable people would ever identify themselves in these ways. Men identify as women, and women as men. Adults identify as children. People identify as animals. Whites identify as blacks. What’s really amazing is that a large part of our culture thinks that it’s just fine to identify any way you desire. I’ve even heard of people identifying themselves in terms of a cake—fluffy, sweet, light, warm, layered, flavored. We live in a crazy, mixed up, confused culture today.

The Gospel of Christ conveys a message about identity. How should Christians identify themselves? That is, what are the ways that Scripture refers to Christians and how should those identifiers impact the Christian life? Who am I from God’s point of view? What does God expect of me now that I’m identified with Christ? That’s what this series of messages is all about.

Unlike other people, Christians must not be confused about their identity. Once we adopt and embrace what God has said regarding identity, we will have a clear sense of who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. We should have no confusion regarding our identity, because God gives it to us and we accept it.

¹ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Introduction to a Hermeneutics of Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 5. Much of the introductory lesson is based on his work.

Although the Bible does not use the word “identity,”² it is full of statements telling us who we are and what we are supposed to do. The Bible gives us an identity, tells us who we are and how we fit into God’s story and how that identity is to be lived out. The great challenge of biblical Christianity is allowing the Spirit, through the Word, to shape us into the people that God wants us to be, i.e., to accept and apply our biblical identity.

Quote: Who are you? What has happened to you and through you? Where are you? Where are you going? Who is going with you? What do you do because of who you are? Answers to these questions reveal your identity. To the degree that Christ is involved in the answers is the degree to which you are a follower of Christ.³

Christians must insist that God, through His Word, has the right to give us our identity. Other factors may affect what we think of ourselves, but our identity must come primarily from what God tells us about ourselves in His Word. God is the potter; we are the clay. The Creator has the right to identify his creation. And we are obligated to identify ourselves by what is true and real, not by our imaginations, our wishes, or our feelings.

Christianity seeks to construct a new identity for its converts. It does not leave them where they were; Christianity remakes our identity. Old things pass away; all things become new (2 Cor 5:17). That’s especially important when one’s chosen identity contradicts God’s pattern for human life. Contradictory identities must submit to divine authority for setting one’s identity.

Identity is far more important than we might think. Because identity is almost second nature, we might not think much about it. But much of life flows from identity. Nearly everything we think and do is rooted in our identity and/or affects our identity.

This summer, we’ll be taking some time to explore the issue of Christian identity. It’s very important that Christians know and adopt the identity God gives us. Knowing and accepting that identity gives us stability and purpose in life. Failing to adopt the identity God gives us sets us off on a sea of uncertainty and instability.

Let’s begin our study of Christian identity by considering...

² The word “identity” appears first toward the end of the sixteenth century. Some argue that the ancients of the Middle East had little concept of the individual self. People identified themselves mostly in association with a group.

³ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Introduction to a Hermeneutics of Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 19.

I. Identity in the Bible

Although the Bible never actually uses the word “identity,” it often addresses the question of identity.

- A. The OT is filled with expressions of God’s identity. God often identifies himself. We find the phrase “I am the Lord” over 160 times throughout the OT.

In our Scripture reading today, we read Exodus 6:1-8, where God repeatedly identifies himself: “I am the LORD.”

Read Deut 14:1-2 and note how Moses ties identity to behavior. The Israelites were a “peculiar people,” and different from all the other nations. God identified himself and his people, and that was the basis for their behavior.

- B. Many NT passages deal with Jesus’ identity.

1. Jesus asked the questions, “Who do people say that I am?” and, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29).
2. At Jesus’ baptism a voice from heaven—the voice of God the Father—asserted Jesus’ identity: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (3:17).
3. At the temptation of Jesus, Satan questioned His identity: “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread,” in effect, “Prove your identity” (Mt 4:3).
4. Jesus identified Himself as the Messiah to the woman at the well (Jn 4:26) and to the disciples of John the Baptist (Mt 11:3f).
5. Jesus identified Himself as the King of the Jews (Mk 15:2; Lk 23:3; Jn 18:37).
6. The affirmation of the centurion at the cross: “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39).
7. Understanding and affirming the identity of Christ is a necessary aspect of salvation (cf. Rom 10:9-10). We must answer the question, “What think ye of Christ?” (Mt 22:42). Christians affirm Jesus’ identity—he is King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior. Or as Doubting Thomas said, “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28).

- C. Paul’s letters also point out the importance of identity.

Paul identifies believers as being “in Christ” about 160 times in the NT.

1. The book of Ephesians largely revolves around the contrast between our spiritual condition before and after identifying with Christ (Cf. 2:1–10; 2:11–13; 2:19–22; 4:17–24; and 5:8).
 2. Galatians revolves around the question, “Who are the true children of Abraham?” Galatians 2:19–20 focuses on identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection. Baptism (Gal 3:26-27) is all about identity.
 3. The book of 1 Corinthians could be summarized with the statement “be who you are.” I.e., live in keeping with your identity.
- D. Throughout the Bible, we find the expression, “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” This is the language of identity. When we identify God as our God, he identifies us as his people.

Trans: Maybe we don’t think much about it, but the Bible says a lot about identity, and we must identify ourselves as God identifies us.

II. Our identity before salvation

Illus.: All military aircraft have a piece of equipment called IFF—Identification Friend or Foe. The IFF equipment sends out a signal so that ground control and other aircraft can tell who is an enemy and who is an ally.

How does the Bible identify God’s enemies? How does the Bible describe the spiritual identity of those without Christ?

- A. They are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph 2:1); “under sin” (Rom 3:9); unrighteous (1 Cor 6:9); the servant of sin (Jn 8:34)

Ephesians 2:2–3 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

1. Spiritual death is the absence of spiritual life. Before conversion to Christ, we are separated from God and thus without hope.
2. Those dead in sin behave consistently with their spiritual condition.

Titus 3:3 *For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.*

1 Peter 4:3 ... *Gentiles [walk] in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.*

- B. The unsaved are without Christ, aliens/strangers/foreigners, having no hope, without God, futile, ignorant, blind, immoral, unclean (Eph 2:12, 19-22, 4:17-24; Col 1:21)
- C. The unsaved are often self-centered, materialistic, arrogant, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure (2 Tim 3:2–5)
- D. Rebellious, ignorant, corrupt, backward, sick (Isa 1:1-8)
- E. Deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9)
- F. Lacking spiritual understanding (Rom 3:11; 1 Cor 1:18, 2:14)
- G. Without the Spirit (i.e., “natural” KJV) (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 2:14)
- H. fools (Prov 1:22, 8:5)

Trans: If you do not know God through faith in Jesus Christ, then this is your identity—you are dead in trespasses and sins, alienated from God, and without hope in this world.

But that need not be your final identity.

III. Faith in Christ transforms our identity.

Quote: Human identity is directly linked to what God says about our identity. We affirm what our Creator says we are. This reorientation is precisely what conversion is about. Conversion is about one’s identity, and conversion is about rewritten autobiographies.⁴

How does faith in Christ change our identity?

- A. Faith in Christ affects our physical and mental characteristics: Humans are made in the image of God. While that is true of all people (whether they know it or not), Christians accept that truth and live out its consequences. We belong to God and are not our own (1 Cor 6:19-20).

⁴ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Jesus and a Hermeneutics of Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 132.

- B. Faith in Christ affects our histories: Christians identify with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Gal 2:20). Our personal history need not define us; our identification with Christ should be the determining factor. We need not be stuck with who we have been.
- C. Faith in Christ affects our continuing experiences: Galatians 2:20 tells us that we interpret our ongoing experiences (i.e., “the life that I now live”) through the lens of faith in Christ.
 - 1. Conversion is both an event and a process; we have been saved (past), are being saved (present) and will be saved (future). We are being changed “from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:16; Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–11). The image of Christ is slowly being formed in us (Rom 8:29).
 - 2. Further, the ongoing activities of worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, and service shape our lives and contribute to our identities.
- D. Faith in Christ affects our relationships: What is the primary relationship in life? That with God the Father through God the Son via the ministry of God the Spirit. The primary, defining element of a Christian identity comes from our relationship with God. Our relationship with God determines all other relationships. Our spiritual family is the family of God—the church, the body of Christ (Mark 3:31–35; Eph 2:19–22).
- E. Faith in Christ affects our commitments:
 - 1. Our commitments to other people
 - 2. Our commitments to ethics or morality; standards of behavior
 - 3. Our commitments to family, church, career, and government
 - 4. Our commitments regarding time and money
- F. Faith in Christ affects our boundaries: we recognize and value the boundaries (i.e., laws, rules, guidelines) that God has given us in His word. We adhere to the boundaries God has given us because we are His people.
- G. Faith in Christ affects our future: we have a “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), a confident expectation that Christ will come to receive his Bride (Jn 14:1-3). We anticipate a home in heaven prepared for us. We look forward to eternal rewards and eternal joy with Christ and the saints.

Trans: All of these are elements of identity—our selves, our histories, our experiences, our relationships, our commitments, our boundaries, and our expectations for the future. And God informs us on all these aspects of identity. Christians simply accept the identity God gives us. We don't have to "find ourselves" or come up with our own identities. The Creator tells us who we are by virtue of our relationship with God, and we accept what he tells us.

Of course, we do discover *some* things about ourselves, but even that self-discovery happens under the providence of God. We discover how God has made and fashioned us, how he has "wired" us to be who we are. But our self-identity must not contradict what we know about how God identifies us. We must not identify ourselves in a way that violates God's Word.

Identity is an important topic for us to consider.

We begin our exploration of identity with the commitment to identify ourselves as God identifies us. As his creatures, we are obligated to accept the way that God identifies us.

Quote: Everywhere Scripture compels us to live in accord with the identity God gives us. The question is whether we will live in accord with faith or unbelief, in accord with our identity in Christ or from some other identity.⁵

Ps 100:3 Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Can you say that of yourself? Can you say, "The Lord is my shepherd"? Can you really claim to be a part of God's flock? Only by identifying with Jesus in his death and resurrection do you have the right to think of yourself in those terms.

If your identity is not "in Christ," then the first thing to do is to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as your savior from sin. You must accept and affirm how the Bible identifies Jesus—as Lord and Savior. If you fail to do that, God will continue to identify you as dead, lost, blind, condemned, and under the wrath of God. Only when you come to Christ in faith and repentance can your identity be transformed from lost to found, from a stranger to a friend, and from an enemy to an ally.

If your identity is in Christ, then you are obligated to live consistently with that identity. We must allow faith in Christ to identify us and to show us how to live.

The rest of the messages in this series will inform us regarding how God identifies his people.

⁵ Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Paul's Focus on Identity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 262–263.