

Christ the Head

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



The writings of the Apostle Paul place identity at the very center of the Christian life, not as a psychological construct or social status, but as a theological reality grounded in union with Christ. For Paul, to be a Christian is not merely to adopt new beliefs or behaviors, but to receive a new identity that redefines every aspect of existence. His letters consistently insist that believers do not primarily belong to themselves, their past, or their cultural markers, but to Christ himself.

Paul's doctrine of identity is most clearly expressed in his repeated use of the phrase "in Christ." This language signifies participation, not imitation. To be "in Christ" means to share in Christ's death and resurrection, such that the believer's former self is no longer the defining reference point. "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul writes, "and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Identity, therefore, is not self-generated but received through grace.

This new identity relativizes all other sources of status and worth. Ethnicity, moral achievement, religious pedigree, and social rank lose their ultimate significance because a deeper reality has taken hold. In Christ, Paul declares, there is "a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The believer's life is now hidden with Christ in God, anchored not in fluctuating circumstances but in the finished work of Jesus. Importantly, Paul connects identity in Christ to ethical transformation. Because believers are already made new, they are called to live in alignment with who they truly are. Christian obedience flows from identity, not toward it. The exhortations of Paul are grounded in the indicative of grace before the imperative of action. Identity in Christ is not merely comforting; it is formative. It reorients the believer's past, stabilizes the present, and secures the future in the faithfulness of God. Tragically, the Corinthian believers had misplaced or lost their rooted sense of identity in Christ. We've already seen the infighting and sin issues that have come in the first 10 chapters; now we'll see how it is negatively affecting their corporate worship. What's the solution? Remember your identity in Christ, and imitate him. Christians are who they are, not because of what they do, but because of whom they belong to. In other words, **you are who you are because of whose you are**. This was true for them in Corinth, and it is true for us in Ames today. It is true for all believers in all places and at all times.

1. Paul in Context

- a. Chapters 11-14 form a new section on corporate worship.
 - i. After prohibiting the Corinthians from becoming involved in pagan worship, Paul now turns to address three items of abuse in their own assemblies: a concern related to women's head covering or hairstyle when praying and prophesying (11:2–16); the abuse of the poor at the Lord's Table (11:17–34); and the abuse of speaking in tongues in the assembly (chaps. 12–14).¹
- b. **A clarifying word** – This is one of those passages in the Bible that teaches something profoundly beautiful and noble. However, too often, it has been used to justify inappropriate, wrong, or downright evil stuff in the name of “righteousness” and “faithfulness to the Bible.” In reality, it has been the process of poor or nonexistent scholarship that has drawn these conclusions and does not reflect what God is actually trying to teach us.
 - i. Kathy Keller shares her experiences in this area in her booklet – “Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles.”²
 - ii. If you have had anyone in the church ever justify inappropriate, wrong, or evil things for this passage, I am sorry and hope that today we can see that God and his Word are indeed good and for our flourishing.
 - iii. God never condones or dismisses the wrongs or injustices that we experience. Instead, he calls his people to act with both truth and compassion, and he will hold every injustice accountable in the end.
 - iv. In order to mine the gold from this tough passage, we must be willing to step out of our context and into the context of the Corinthians. After all, this letter was written to them, and we must understand it from their perspective if we are to apply it correctly to our context.
- c. **The context of the text matters significantly to both how we understand a text and how we apply the text.**
 - i. This section of chapter 11 is one of the most difficult passages in all of Paul's letters to interpret. There are things that Paul talks about that clearly he and the Corinthians had a reference point for, but we don't. There are cultural realities that were present and understood, which leave us confused and trying to sort them out. Simply, this is a really difficult passage with some really confusing elements. Here is how one scholar expresses this same idea
 1. “Hands down, 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 is the most difficult passage I've ever studied in my twenty years as a Pauline scholar.¹ And this isn't simply because of Paul's seemingly odd statements about women. If Paul means what he says and says what he means, then we must let Paul be Paul and not try to give him a twenty-first-century makeover.”³
 - ii. One of the debated elements in this passage is that of head coverings and what Paul was talking about.
 1. **Female head coverings** In Paul's day, married women were expected to cover their heads in public, including public worship settings. Head coverings (or veils)

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 491.

² Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 31ff.

³ Preston Sprinkle, *From Genesis to Junia* (2025) (p. 194). Kindle Edition.

signaled a woman's marital status and were a sign of respectability and modesty. Women who didn't cover their heads were assumed to be single (and sexually available), prostitutes, or slaves. If a married woman went out in public without a head covering, it indicated that she was looking to have an affair. It would have been distracting, to say the least, if a woman prayed and prophesied like this in front of men. Certainly, the woman's husband would be shamed. And her behavior would be alarming to any unbeliever looking on (cf. 1 Cor. 14:23). This is why Paul concludes that a (married) woman with her head uncovered might as well shave her head (11:5–6), since this was one punishment for a wife who committed adultery.⁴

- a. In Cyprus law, “a woman guilty of adultery shall have her hair cut off and be a prostitute” (Dio Chrysostom, Or. 64.3; cf. Winter, After Paul, 128).
2. Male head coverings - Male head coverings, however, didn't convey marital status. While some men covered their heads on various occasions, it's not always clear what this signified. But we do have extensive archaeological evidence—even from Corinth itself—depicting high-status men covering their heads while participating in pagan worship. “For those elite or high-status men taking a central role in sacrifices or worship, the Roman ethos was one in which the head was always covered.”⁵
- d. Headship in their context. - **Greek Household codes.**
 - i. This is key in understanding what Paul is about to unpack in this passage. And it helps us to understand why Paul's exhortation to them was so controversial.
 - ii. Aristotle's concept of household codes, or *oikonomia*, was articulated primarily in his work *Politics*. In this text, Aristotle views the household (*oikos*) as the basic unit of society and explores its internal structure and relationships. His understanding of the household revolves around three key relationships: master-slave, husband-wife, and parent-child.
 - iii. Aristotle's household codes reflect a hierarchical structure where the relationships are based on a concept of natural authority and subordination, with the purpose of maintaining order and achieving the good life both within the household and in the larger political community.
 - iv. **Aristotle on God** - Aristotle also states the expectations in terms of love for the superior by the one over whom he stands when he states: “**For it would be ludicrous if one were to accuse God because he does not return love in the same way as he is loved, or for a subject to make this accusation against a ruler; for it is the part of a ruler to be loved, not to love or else to love in another way**” (Eth. eud. 7.3.4). The difference was a reflection of the asymmetrical relationship between the head and the body for the good of the whole, an understanding that resulted in a set of expectations conforming to the nature of each part's position.⁶
- e. “Head” (*kephalē*) = Source
 - i. Michelle Lee-Barnewall helps us to understand the nature of *kephalē* – “**We will see that while *kephalē* can have connotations of “authority,” the main significance of its**

⁴ Preston Sprinkle, From Genesis to Junia (2025) (p. 196). Kindle Edition.

⁵ Preston Sprinkle, From Genesis to Junia (2025) (p. 196). Kindle Edition.

⁶ Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

use is the way in which Paul reverses the cultural expectations of the “head” according to the radical new values of the Christian community.”⁷

ii. Paul is not saying:

1. Christ is less than God.
2. Women are less than or lower than men.
 - a. Both of these statements are unbiblical and wrong.

iii. Paul is saying:

1. Christ is begotten of God.
 - a. Cf. Jn. 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...”
 - b. The virgin birth points us ultimately to Jesus’ identity as the divine Son of God. Jesus did not become God’s Son simply because he was born without a human father.¹⁹⁸ The divine Person who became Jesus of Nazareth existed in relationship with God the Father from all eternity. He was God’s own Son who became Immanuel, God with us: The Creator became a creature; the Word became flesh; the Judge became the one who is judged, thus reconciling humanity to himself.⁸
2. Men and women share the same dignified creation but were created distinctively (purposefully unique).
 - a. This is exactly in line with what Genesis teaches. Adam and Eve were both made by God. Both were given the image and likeness of God in their creation. I.e., Nothing was withheld from one that wasn’t given to the other. And, they were made unique from one another for unique roles and purposes.
 - b. We don’t exactly know what Paul means when he talks about “glory of God” and “glory of man,” but we do know that he is well-versed in OT theology and draws on creation often to talk about men and women.
 - c. Here is a helpful theological perspective on what Paul is addressing:
“Relational responsibility - Thus Paul’s concern is not hierarchical (who has authority over whom), but relational (the unique relationships that are predicated on one’s being the source of the other’s existence). Indeed, he says nothing about man’s authority; his concern is with the woman’s being man’s *glory*, the one without whom he is not complete (vv. 7c–9). To blur that relationship is to bring shame on her “head.” This means that the middle clause, “the man is the head of woman,” refers to the creation account also alluded to in vv. 8 and 12. “*The man*” would refer to Adam, and “the woman” to Eve; thus, “the man is the source of the woman’s life.” But as v. 12 makes plain, that is only part of the story; in a much more significant way, “all things,” both man and woman, “come from God.”⁹

f. Greek Household codes and the Biblical creation narrative.

⁷ Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 218). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁸ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 123). (Function). Kindle Edition.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 503–504.

- i. The household codes of Greek and then Roman society stated that men and women were of completely different orders in creation. Men were of the highest order and made from the best stuff. Women were of a much lower order and made from lesser stuff. This thought process governed much of the ancient Roman world.
- ii. While Paul's words seem controversial or "outdated" to us, when we understand them in context, Paul is actually reversing established power structures and household dynamics to a place of mutual honor, dignity, and equality. All of this is rooted in the biblical account of creation. That is Paul's primary source for his theology in this area.

2. "Don't be contentious."

a. Orderly worship matters.

- i. This is the main idea of the larger section of chapter 11-14.
 - 1. We can hear Paul addressing something that was going on in the Corinthian church that involved the issue of head coverings and public prayer and prophesy. But the real issue is the lack of order in the Corinthian worship service.
 - 2. It is interesting that in this section Paul doesn't forbid men or women from praying or prophesying publicly in church. But, the way they were going about it was not honoring to each other or the Lord.
- ii. **Orderly worship honors God by keeping him as the sole focus.**
 - 1. There is only one object of worship in the church, God. When we do anything that makes anyone or anything else an object of worship we are out of line. Their public demonstrations were not acts of faithfulness; they were acts of vanity.
- iii. **Orderly worship honors fellow believers by not bullying or bulldozing each other in the pursuit of public attention.**
 - 1. vv. 4-5: **Communal responsibility** - Paul seems concerned to shift the problem from one of individual freedom to one of relational responsibility. The problem lay squarely on the women's heads, but it was affecting male/female relationships in the present age. By making their appearance such that it tended to eliminate distinctions between the sexes, they were bringing shame on that relationship, which had not yet been abrogated even though the new age had been inaugurated.¹⁰
 - 2. We will also come to see that there were chaotic and public outbursts in the assembly. This bulldozes other members and becomes a frantic environment that looks like Corinthian temple worship.
- iv. **Orderly worship honors the lost who are seeking by not confusing the chaotic temple worship of Corinth with the worship of Christ.**
 - 1. We are going to hear in the coming chapters where Paul is going to call them out for their chaotic worship because it doesn't look distinctive in anyway from the temple worship of Corinth. The Corinthians' neighbors, who were seeking something different than what the temples could offer them, would show up and see what amounted to a slightly different temple service. There was nothing unique about the Christians or their worship. They were just like any other

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 502.

religious group in Corinth. Paul tells the Corinthians that this is tragic and should not be.

b. Rewind to the main Corinthian problem, pride.

- i. Pride was the main and persistent problem in the Corinthian church.
- ii. What is pride? – It is an increasingly inward gaze that focuses solely on one's own needs, perspectives, and feelings. It culminates in the demand that they be served above all else.
 - 1. This pride was the root of the head coverings issue, and it was the root of their contentiousness.

c. What does it mean to be contentious? –

- i. philoneikos - “someone who loves strife” “Fond of victory.” / “Fond of strife.” → “Misery loves company.”
- ii. **Important** - Contentiousness does not equal disagreement.
 - 1. **You can disagree and not experience contentiousness.**
- iii. Contentiousness is rooted in pride.
 - 1. Again, you can have disagreements, but contentiousness (loving strife) is an epitome of arrogance. It is prideful to think that you are so right that you need to negatively represent someone to other people in order to validate your own perspective.
 - 2. Paul is clear, this is not permissible in any church... ever.
- iv. What are the socially acceptable expressions of being contentious?
 - 1. Do you enjoy demanding your rights and freedoms over the good and health of the body?
 - a. This is very likely what Paul was addressing specifically with the head coverings. Some new level of freedom was likely happening within the Corinthian context and the problem wasn't the freedom, the problem was the attitude that came along with it.
 - 2. Do you find yourself having “meetings after the meeting?”
 - 3. Do you find yourself “venting” about others in your life but never actually going to that person?
 - 4. Do you enjoy the perceived power of “they and them” when giving “feedback?”
 - a. These are some of the ways that we “politely” become contentious in the church. My favorite is the contentious prayer request which is really just gossip with a sprinkle of slander.
- b. **The difference between these “polite” expressions of contentiousness and godly advice are these two things.**
 - i. Godly advice always moves towards a place of understanding, peace, and reconciliation.
 - ii. If those things are not possible (for whatever reason), Godly advice doesn't give an audience for gossip or slander.

3. “Imitate Christ”

- a. Paul is addressing the communal worship problems that were rooted in pride within the Corinthian church. Just like was saw back in chapter 1, pride ultimately stemmed from a loss of identity. They forgot who they were because they forgot whose they were. Yet, just as we

heard in the opening lines of the letter, we hear once again in 11:1, you belong to Christ... so be like him.

- i. This is a crucial step for them and us. We are to aspire more and anything or anyone to look like Jesus. And, it is clear that arguing, divisions, rivalries, pride, and contentiousness are not Christlike.

b. Imitate Christ by being...

- i. Humble - Considering others first. (Phil 2:8)
 1. **⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**
- ii. Patient - Seeing the big picture. (Eph. 2:13)
 1. **¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**
- iii. Gentle - Exercising self-control when I'm upset. (Gen. 3:15)
 1. **¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."**
 - a. This is the first offer of salvation from God in the face of sin. Instead of crushing Adam and Eve, God was gentle and promised to deliver a savior.
- iv. Loving - Working for someone's good. (Mk. 10:45)
 1. **"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**
- v. Here is Phil 2:1-11 in its entirety. It is such a powerful statement from Paul both on who Jesus is, and who we are to be because we are in Christ. - **"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

c. A key concept! – Courageous obedience.

- i. Courageous obedience is about pursuing Christlikeness in a wholehearted and life-defining way. It is not about settling for the lowest moral bar possible.
 1. Am I settling for moral obedience that makes me feel good, or am I wholeheartedly following God in a true life-defining way?
 2. When I think of the abundant life of Christ, do I think of a list of "dos and don'ts" or do I think about encountering and enjoying partnership with God every day?
- ii. Remember – Avoiding sin is not bad, but you were saved for so much more than to just avoid the "wrong things." You were saved to partner with God in his plan of redemption.