

A CELEBRATION OF IDENTITY
1 Cor. 11.17-34

INTRODUCTION: this morning I am beginning a series of six messages designed to help you understand why it is important to be part of a local church. My goal is not to see how many people we can get to join Bethel, my goal is two-fold:

1. If you are a member of Bethel, these message will hopefully to reinforce the value of being a church member;
2. if you are not a member of Bethel Baptist Church, that God will lead you to make Bethel your church home. The reason why I said “that God will lead you” because ultimately the local church you belong to is a matter between you and God.

I am also going to put my sermon notes on our website each week so that you can have access to them, to read them and maybe share them with others who do not have a church home.

But first a few preliminaries.

Why is church attendance and church membership so important?

Both membership and attendance are important for several reasons that will be covered in these messages: our identity as Christians, what we believe, why we come together, for spiritual growth, for spiritual safety, for community, and for eternity.

I have looked at some data from various surveys, not many but a few, surveys conducted over the past five or six years on church attendance, church membership, and the possible reasons behind the numbers. Here are just a few broad remarks about what the surveys have uncovered:

In a 2020 Gallup Poll, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999. U.S. church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the next 6 decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century. [so from a high of 73% church members in 1937 to now only 47% in 2020, that's a sad reality.]

[in a related article from the Gospel Coalition], [one of the reasons for church membership decline is] those in older generations who were likely to be church members are being replaced in the U.S. adult population by younger people less likely to join institutions.

And this is where it hits home: generations are increasingly becoming less and less interested

in church, in the Bible, in denominations. It is up to each successive generation to pass along their faith in Christ or the following generations wind up with no belief system whatsoever.

Many Americans today claim no religious affiliation whatsoever; researchers call them the NONES – they have no preference. And if they have no preference then they are less inclined to be part of a church family and have no faith foundation whatsoever.

This is why it is imperative that a clear understanding of the church and church membership be preached and promoted, to demonstrate the value of being part of a local body of believers.

So again, my prayer is that you will gain a greater understanding and appreciation for what it means to be part of a local body of believers and you will want to be associated with a local

church, hopefully Bethel, but again, that is a decision that is between you and God.

So let's dive in to 1 Cor. 11 to gain an understanding about the value of our identity as children of God.

[scripture]

I. THE FOUNDATION OF OUR IDENTITY

I want to take you all the way back to the beginning of 1 Cor. 1.1-2 for just a moment:

***1 COR. 1.1-2:** Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.*

I use the word IDENTITY for a specific reason. Church membership is all tied up in this word

IDENTITY. If you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you have been given a new identity, and that identity is a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ. The foundation of our identity is right here in verse 2: SAINTS BY CALLING, WITH ALL WHO IN EVERY PLACE CALL ON THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

A SAINT is a person who has placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. The word itself means holy one, and the only reason we are holy is because God has drawn us to Himself in salvation when we placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

ALL WHO IN EVERY PLACE: every person, regardless of where they live, regardless of what nationality they are, they are all saints by the fact they have trusted in Jesus Christ.

The foundation of my identity, and the foundation of your identity is in the cross and

the empty tomb. The cross is where Jesus paid the price through His broken body and shed blood for our sin, and the empty tomb is the evidence that no grave, no stone, no tomb could hold him down because he walked out of the tomb on the third day in victory over sin, death, and the grave.

We are all, by faith in Jesus Christ, children of God, saints by calling and saints by choosing, because of Jesus Christ.

This week when I went to the doctor, when I checked in I was asked for two pieces of identification: my driver's license and my insurance card. Your driver's license is what you apply for after taking written and practical driving tests and pass; your insurance card is issued to you by your health insurance company after filling out forms and getting approved.

But when it comes to our spiritual identity, that is all tied up, not in what we have done, but what God by His grace has done because of Jesus Christ.

Right now this morning you have either placed your faith and trust in Jesus or you have not, it is just that simple. If you have then you are a saint of the Lord and a child of God; if you have not then I want to invite you this morning to trust Christ. You can see me after the service this morning, you can fill out one of our connection cards, you can text me or email me, however you want to do it, I want to urge you to place your faith and trust in Jesus this morning for the forgiveness of your sins and life everlasting.

II. THE EXPLANATION OF OUR IDENTITY

Second, notice what Paul wrote in verse 2 of chapter 1:

TO THE CHURCH OF GOD WHICH IS AT CORINTH.

What is the church? If we are going to discover the importance of church membership then we have to understand the church.

The word CHURCH simply means a gathering of people in public assembly, and specifically it means a gathering of Christians. Now in the Old Testament, before the establishment of the church, there was the congregation or the assembly of Hebrews. The moment a person places their faith and trust in Jesus, not only are they made children of God, not only are they adopted into the family of God, but they are also made part of the church of God.

The church can be understood in two ways:

invisible and universal; and visible and local.

The church is invisible and universal because it is not a building, the church is every believer in Jesus Christ wherever they are in the world.

Russian Christians are part of the same

universal church that Christians in Illinois are – all Christians around the world are part of both the invisible and universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is also local and visible. In other words, as a Christian, I am part of the worldwide church of the Lord Jesus, but I am also a member of Bethel Baptist Church, a local body of believers in Jesus Christ. And while it is God who makes us part of His universal church, it is our decision, hopefully led by the Holy Spirit, to be part of a particular local church.

And the church, the local church, was established to gather for worship, for training, for fellowship, for celebration, for being involved in sharing with the world the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now go to chapter 11 and I will show you how this is seen:

Notice v. 18: WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER AS A
CHURCH:

Paul's letter of 1 Corinthians has more references to the church coming together than any other letter Paul wrote, and chapter 11 has all the references except one found in ch. 14. What does it mean when Paul wrote, "when you come together?" Paul is speaking of the congregation of believers gathering in one place for a particular purpose, in this case the observance of the Lord's Supper. Do not miss the significance of this. God has created us and has established His church to be a church, a group, a family of believers that come together on a regular basis. This word COME TOGETHER can mean assemble or gather mainly for religious purposes. It is hard to celebrate our identity in Christ with other believers when we distance ourselves from gathering, from coming together as believers in Christ. And I would submit that

in some respects we have become our own worst enemy because now with on-line streaming we have made it way too easy to stay at home in our fuzzy slippers and tune in to church, or tune out whatever the case. I know for me, when I am not here, I miss. I miss the fellowship, I miss the encouragement, I miss catching up with others, I just miss. And what I miss cannot be recovered.

Just think of our identity as Christians this way: the church is the presence of Christ in the community; that means, as Christians, WE are the presence of Christ in the community. The church is how God and the Lord Jesus Christ are explained in real-life, down-to-earth everyday dealings with a lost world.

So as Christians, our FOUNDATION is at the cross and the empty tomb;

As Christians, we are part of the Lord's church locally that helps explain God and the Lord Jesus through our lives daily.

III. THE CELEBRATION OF OUR IDENTITY

The Lord's Supper is the celebration of our identity as children of God. That's what we are going to celebrate here this morning. One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth was to correct some issues in the church, and the improper observance of the Lord's Supper was one of those issues. Notice:

v. 18

there were divisions in the church, some were treating the Lord's Supper like a regular dinner feast and others were using it as an excuse to get drunk

v. 21

they were treating the Lord's supper as an excuse for excess

v. 34

you can have your big meal at home, the Lord's Supper is a commemoration, not a buffet!

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER? A visible reminder of the price that was paid for our salvation. The bread represents the broken body of Jesus; the juice represents the shed blood of Jesus in payment for our sin.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OBSERVE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

1. To PARTICIPATE in this powerful reminder. I

have to ask, why wouldn't a church member want to participate in the Lord's Supper, it is a visible reminder of what brought us together and keeps us together as a people of faith.

2. To CELEBRATE our salvation. Yes salvation is

to be celebrated all the time. Think about it, by faith in Jesus Christ you have been forgiven of your sins and you have been rescued from the

wrath of God on the sin of the world, your eternal destination has been changed from hell-bound sinner to heaven-bound saint through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

3. To ASSOCIATE with other brothers and sisters in Christ in what brought us together and holds us together. God has made us to be in community with others that have in common our faith.

4. To ANTICIPATE the return of the Lord. Yes Jesus will return one day and what a great day that will be. And until that day we gather to sing, to praise the Lord, to take part in the celebration of our salvation, this is why God established the church and why we gather every week.

The Lord's Supper reminds us of who we are and why we are here.

The Lord's Supper is a celebration of our salvation through the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Jesus died for our sins, He was buried, and He was raised on the third day so that by faith in Him you will be forgiven, and given eternal life.

To be part of the Lord's church is to be part of this incredible family that was brought into existence through the cross and the empty tomb. To be part of the Lord's church locally is to identify with those in the community who have trusted Christ and have come together for a common cause – the good news of Jesus Christ.