



## Love the Church for Who She Is— Her Identity

David Sunday

September 1, 2019

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*“How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs, even faints, for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Blessed are those who dwell in Your house. They are ever praising You...Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Psalm 84:1,2,4,10).*

If you agree, God’s people, say amen. Think about all the options you said no to in order to be here with the church today. You could be at Costco or Jewel right now, getting ready for your Labor Day picnic. Maybe you could be boating on the Fox River right now. Or you could be waiting in line at Buttermilk for a table for brunch. Or you could be at a sporting event with one of your kids. Or you could be sleeping in right now. But you chose to be here.

You’re here with the church of the living God. I trust that you’re here because you believe there’s something good and something pleasant in store for God’s people when we gather together in unity. I hope you’re here because you resonate with the hymn writer Timothy Dwight, who said:

I love Thy church, O God  
Her walls before Thee stand  
Dear as the apple of Thine eye  
And graven on Thy hands  
For her my tears shall fall  
For her my prayers ascend  
To her my toils and cares be given  
Till toils and cares shall end

I hope that’s how you feel. My aim during these five Sundays in September is to stoke your passion for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you love the church, I’m hoping these messages will help you love her more. If your love for the church is waning right now, I’m praying the Holy Spirit will use His Word during the month of September to fan the embers of your love back into a flame. Because, friends, do you realize who the church is? If you remember who the church is and always keep that in mind, you would never cease to love her. You would always be devoted to her with undying love.

So that's our theme this morning: love the church for who she is. We're going to look at five aspects of the church's identity. You might think of this as the church as God sees her, or the church as God reveals her to be in Scripture.

### **1. The church is created by God, for the glory of God. It's not a human invention.**

We're going to look at several Scriptures. First, Deuteronomy 7:6, where we read that God chose a people for Himself: *"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."*

This was written to the people of God in the old covenant, but it's important for us to understand that there is only one people of God throughout history. Old Testament believers and New Testament believers are both called "the people of God." In the Old Testament, believers were saved by grace through faith in the Christ of prophecy, not by works. No one has ever been saved by works. Old Testament believers were saved by grace through faith in the Christ of prophecy, expressing that faith by participating in the worship and sacrifices God had ordained in the temple. All of those sacrifices were looking forward to their fulfillment in Christ.

In the New Testament—and today—how are believers saved? We are saved by grace through faith in the Christ of history. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the perfect sacrifice that atones for sins has been made once and for all. So here's the definition of the church:

It's all the people of God from every race, every land and every age who have been chosen by God the Father, purchased by Christ's blood, sanctified (set apart to be holy) by the Holy Spirit to be God's treasured possession.

This means the church is not a human organization comprised of people who share a common interest, like the Chicago Botanical Society. The church is also not a building. The church is a people—a group of people whom God is forming for Himself. You didn't come into church this morning. The church came into this building this morning. We brought the church into this room. This room is not the church—we brought the church in.

Now, this doesn't mean that any time a couple of Christians just happen to meet each other that we're "having church." When you bump into one another at the Arcadium Coffeehouse, it doesn't mean you've gathered with the church this week. Even going to a small group is not the same as gathering with the church. The church assembles whenever God's people gather in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, to give Him praise and thanks, to hear His Word, to receive His sacraments, to minister to one another in accountability to His appointed under-shepherds, then to be recommissioned and sent into the world as His people

living for His glory. That's a particular gathering with a particular purpose, ending with the glory of God.

Someone put it like this: "The church was designed by God to reflect His glory like a prism. As we behold God's glory in the face of Christ when we gather together and the radiance of His glory shines into us, then we go out into the world and His glory shines through us to reflect the rainbow of God's perfections outward to the world." His glory shines through His people so the people of the world can see the rainbow of God's perfections.

So the first identity marker is that we are a people called out from the world, created to live for God's glory—not a human invention.

## **2. The church is being built by Christ and is therefore indestructible.**

Think of all the care that a master builder puts into designing, framing and constructing a house that he is going to live in. It's a labor of love. Every detail matters and that builder is not going to stop until the house is complete.

When Jesus asked His disciples in Matthew 16:16-18 (NIV), "*Who do you say that I am?*", Simon Peter answered, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" He's confessing his faith in Christ the way we did in the Nicene Creed this morning. Jesus replied, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood.*" No one sees Who Jesus is and truly believes in Him just through our own ingenuity or through any human being revealing Jesus to us. Only the Father Who is in heaven can reveal to a person the truth of Who Jesus is.

So if you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, praise God for the grace He's shown you in revealing that to you. Then Jesus said this, "*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock*" (the rock of your confession of Me) "*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*"

That's a strong statement. Because the church is the building project of the resurrected King, it's not going to fail. Nothing can stand in the way of Jesus completing this building. He doesn't need a building permit from the ruler of this age. Satan doesn't own any territory on which Jesus cannot build. The whole earth belongs to the Lord Christ. There's no barricade Satan sets up that will prevent the construction of this building from proceeding. And though the enemy tries to destroy the church, John Calvin nailed it when he said this: "The story of the Church is a story of many resurrections." That's because Christ is building it and no one can prevail against it. Not even the gates of Hades, death and hell can stop the progress, the advance, of His church.

So remember this, dear church: you are being built by Christ. You and I are living stones in this building (1 Peter 2:4-5). He builds with precious materials that were obtained by His own

blood. That's us. We're the living stones. And Christ is the firm foundation of this building, so it's going to last for all eternity. Even when renovations need to be made in particular churches, we know that the church is not going to collapse into the sand, because it's built on the firm foundation of Christ. No power of hell and no scheme of man will be able to demolish the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's another verse in the hymn we sang this morning that I want you to consider:

The church will never perish  
Her dear Lord to defend  
To guide, sustain and cherish  
Is with her to the end  
Though there be those that hate her  
And false sons in her pale  
Against both foe and traitor  
She ever shall prevail

[From "The Church's One Foundation" by S.J. Stone]

These things are true because the church is being built by Christ. But what exactly is Christ building His church to be? What is the proposed use of this building He is making? That brings us to the third aspect of the church's identity this morning.

### **3. The church is a temple in which God lives by His Holy Spirit.**

In Ephesians 2 we find a breathtaking passage the Apostle Paul wrote to Gentile believers. Beginning in verse 12, he's telling us to remember who we once were. We were separate from Christ. We were excluded from citizenship in Israel. We were foreigners to the covenants of promise. We were without hope and without God in this world. That's who we were.

But then the glorious light of the gospel broke through to us. Look at verse 13. I love how it begins: "*But now...*" You always want to underline those contrasts in the Bible. "*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one*"—Jews and Gentiles. There aren't two peoples of God; there is one people of God. He's made us both one.

He has "*broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments [expressed in] ordinances, that he might create in himself...*" That's the key—it's through being joined to Jesus that you become a part of this people He's forming. "*That he might create in himself...*" how many new men? "*...one.*"

*<sup>16</sup> ...One new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and*

*peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

This is breathtaking language about who the church is. Think about the glory of that. You can tell a lot about a church by the way we advertise ourselves. The BBC commented, “Perhaps there’s something about the church’s image or self-image that it advertises the faith without any mention of God, religion or church.” Maybe you’ve seen this.

I did a survey and found churches using slogans like these:

- “Church—not as churchy as you think.”
- “Never church as usual.”
- “Faith is a journey, NOT A GUILT TRIP.”
- “A home for health and strength as you grow in your spiritual journey.”

These are some of the ways we advertise ourselves. I get it. We want to be welcoming and inviting to people, but I wonder if, in our effort to make people feel at home in church, we forget that the church is not ultimately our home.

What does Ephesians say here? It says the church is “*the household of God.*” The church is “*a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*” How glorious that is! Think back into the Old Testament when King Solomon built that great temple and then dedicated it to the Lord. We read in 1 Kings 8 that the glory of the Lord filled the temple, which was so powerful and palpable that the priests couldn’t even stand to minister. They fell on their faces because of God’s glory in that place.

Then you go to the prophet Ezekiel many years later and see the glory of the Lord departing from the temple in stages, so that God could bring judgment upon Jerusalem. But then by the end of the book of Ezekiel, God promises that He will again dwell in the midst of His people and He will be at home in their midst. We know that in the later part of the Old Testament the temple was rebuilt, but it never had the glory it once had—until Jesus came. We read these words in Colossians 1:19, “*In [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*”

Jesus Himself becomes the living temple of God which is where Ephesians 2 comes in. Now that Jesus has died, risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven, He has poured out His Spirit on His church which has become the temple of the living God—just like Jesus. Jesus is building us to be a dwelling place for God, by His Spirit. That should take our breath away. That should fill us with awe whenever we gather with God’s church to hear God’s

Word, to sing God's praises, to seek God's face, to participate in Christ's sacraments and to strengthen one another so that we can be recommissioned to go out into the world for His glory.

Friends, people can be entertained anywhere. But when you come to church, you're supposed to find something here that you cannot find anywhere in the world. People should find God dwelling in us by His Spirit. Where else can you meet with God, if not in church? He's alive, right? God is real, right? He's not just a figment of our imagination—He is a living God Whose glory dwells in our midst. This is where people encounter God in the midst of His people. So our greatest concern should not be, "Do people feel at home here?" Our greatest concern should be to make sure God feels at home here.

The Puritans talked about "entertaining the Holy Spirit," making Him feel at home in your life. We should be aiming for this as a church. We should be entertaining the Holy Spirit. We should be saying, "Holy Spirit, You are welcome here among us. We want to revere You, listen to You and adore the Son Whom You came to shine the spotlight on—the Savior, Jesus Christ—because this is Your dwelling place. This is Your home." That's what the church is.

#### **4. Each local church is an embassy of the one holy, catholic (universal, worldwide), apostolic church.**

Then the fourth identifying mark is a little different. We as the church are an embassy. Each local church is an embassy of the one holy, catholic (which means universal and worldwide), apostolic (which means sent into the world) church. We are an embassy of the one holy, catholic, apostolic church.

Notice the way Paul addresses the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:12: *"To the church of God in Corinth..."* So if you pinged their location on Google maps, it would be an ancient city in Greece. But Sam Allberry—in a book we give to all our visitors here called Why Bother With Church?—points out that Paul does not say they're part of the church of God, as if the church of God is all the local churches collected up and put together. No. The local church is the church of God in that particular locale. They are the embodiment in Corinth of the universal church. Here's something to chew on. Allberry writes:

The church functions like an embassy of this new society that God is creating through Christ. Just as the US embassy in London is considered a part of US sovereign territory overseas in a foreign land, so the local church is a small part of heavenly territory in this world.

We, the people of New Covenant Bible Church, are heavenly territory in the Fox Valley of Illinois. We're an embassy of God's Kingdom. There's another very important reference related to

this in 1 Timothy 3:14-15 (NIV) where Paul says to Timothy, *“I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.”*

Wow! How were we born again into God’s family? We were born again through the Word of truth that gave us life. And now, as God’s born-again people, we maintain and uphold God’s truth in the world. We are the pillar and foundation of the truth. So when people want to know, “What is truth?” they should be able to look at the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and say, “There it is. They’re the pillar upholding God’s truth. Their whole life and existence is founded upon the truth, so the way they live reflects the truth of God.”

Friends, this means a community that doesn’t have a church that is proclaiming the whole counsel of God and seeking to live in accordance with it—a church-forsaken community—is in grave peril. The people in that community don’t have access to the truth of God’s holiness that we’ve sung about this morning. They don’t have access to the truth about God’s goodness and love. That’s a serious thing.

Sam Allberry puts it like this. “Lacking a church is not equivalent to lacking a decent supermarket or movie theatre; it is like lacking a hospital or a source of water. It is an utter necessity.”

That’s why healthy churches are always concerned about multiplying other churches. That’s why healthy churches are always thinking about communities within their reach that don’t have a church. Think about all the rural communities in Illinois where people cannot find a church that proclaims the whole counsel of God. Think about all the places in the world where unreached people groups don’t have access to the pillar and ground of the truth. If we are a healthy church, we will want to be involved with other churches in planting and multiplying churches so people can have access to the truth. We’re an embassy of God’s Kingdom. We’re the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Now, there’s a lot more the Bible has to say about the church’s identity and we’ll get to that in the weeks to come. Things like the body of Christ—we’ll touch on that next week—or the family of believers or the flock that Christ shepherds. But this morning there’s one more aspect of the church’s identity that I want to highlight before turning to a couple points of application.

## **5. The Church is the Bride of Jesus.**

This for me is the most poignant, most tender, most beautiful way to describe who the church is—the bride of Christ. Think about that. God created marriage in Genesis 2 in order to

portray, illustrate and to be an acted-out parable of the eternal marriage between God and His people, between Christ and His church.

So if you're married, your marriage is designed to point to something infinitely greater than your marriage: the eternal marriage of Christ to His people. If you're not married, you're not missing out on something essential to true joy and intimacy in this life, because there is a more pure, more profound, more permanent relationship that God invites His people into. We sang about it this morning in that first verse of the hymn:

From heav'n He came and sought her  
To be His holy Bride  
With His own blood He bought her  
And for her life He died

[From "The Church's One Foundation" by S.J. Stone]

We read these wonderful, stirring words in Ephesians 5:25-27:

*Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

There are some truths in the Bible that are so vital you'd be willing to die for them. The Trinity that we read about in the Nicene Creed—you'd be willing to die for that, right? The deity of Christ, the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures—these are things you'd die for. Salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone—these are life and death truths. But would you die for the church? Would you be willing to lay down your life to preserve, protect, defend and cherish the church of the Lord Jesus Christ? Would you die for her?

Jesus did. He laid down His life for the church. He gave Himself up for her, a living sacrifice on a cruel cross. He didn't do it because she was beautiful or holy. No, she was defiled. She was like Gomer, the prostitute that the prophet Hosea married. Jesus died for His church in order to sanctify her, in order to cleanse her, in order to prepare her to be His holy bride. That's how committed Jesus is to His church. She's not just a building; she's His bride. He's not just our heavenly King; He's our Bridegroom, our Husband. The church isn't Jesus' hobby; it's His marriage, says Sam Allberry. He's the King Who desires our beauty and He's committed to making us beautiful forever.

When Jesus returns, He's going to be coming back for a marriage feast. You and I who trust in Him are not going to be wedding crashers at that feast. We're not going to be sneaking in through the back door. We're going to be coming down the center aisle, clothed in fine linen, white

and pure, which has been given to us to wear—the righteous robe, the wedding gown of Christ’s righteousness.

Do you love the church as Jesus does? Do you view the church through the eyes of her Groom? Will you ask Jesus to give you His eyes for His bride this morning, to see her not only as she is, but as she will be—shining in the splendor of His holiness? If you remembered who the church is, you would never cease to love her.

I want to close with two applications this morning: a temptation to resist and an invitation to receive.

### **A temptation to resist**

First, the temptation. Over this last decade we’ve seen a rise in what is called “churchless Christianity.” It’s the idea that you can have a strong relationship with Jesus without being committed to His church; that you can actually be a better Christian and do more good for the world without getting involved in the church with all her hassles and politics. Church is just an obstacle. Get out there and be the church! That’s the idea.

Friends, the Holy Spirit is calling us to resist that temptation. Resist the temptation to grow cold, critical, aloof, distant and disengaged from the church. Resist the temptation to deceive yourself into thinking you can have a vibrant relationship with Jesus without His church. It’s a lie.

Consider this searching question by Pastor Scott Sauls: “What does it say about us if the church is good enough for the Father to adopt, for the Spirit to inhabit and for Jesus to marry...but not good enough for us to join?”

Sometimes the church acts in ways that are horrendous. If you’re here this morning and you’ve been abused by the church, I admire your courage for being here or for watching on livestream. On September 22, we’re going to address the question, “How do I love the church when the church has hurt me deeply?” That’s an important question. You need to know that Jesus doesn’t turn a blind eye to the church’s faults and failures and infidelities. Just read Revelation 2-3 and you’ll see how Jesus walks among the churches, inspects them, then calls them to repentance for their sins and failures. But friends, even though Jesus sees all, there is nothing Jesus sees in His church that could possibly diminish or destroy His love for her. That means you and I must repent if we’re allowing the faults and failures of the church to diminish our love for her.

As we’re preparing to come to the communion table this morning, I urge you to search your heart. You’re going to feast at this table with brothers and sisters who are dear to Christ, purchased by His blood. You can’t even begin to fathom how much Jesus loves you and how much He loves the person beside you, in front of you, across the room from you.

One sure way to lose a friend is to act coldly toward his wife. I'll be friends with any of you, but if you criticize Kate, if you berate her, if you act coldly toward her when she walks into the room, that's going to affect our friendship. Friend of Jesus, how can you harbor coldness in your heart toward His bride? How can you treat her with indifference, bitterness and unforgiveness?

When you take communion, realize this is a family meal. This isn't just a solitary time between you and the Lord. Jesus didn't save you just so you could have your own little personal relationship with Him. That's not the goal of your salvation. Jesus saved you into a family. Jesus saved you into a church that exists to declare His glory in the world. This communion table is an earthly sign of a heavenly reality. This communion feast is a rehearsal dinner for the wedding supper of the Lamb. So come to the rehearsal meal full of love for the bride. I don't think anyone can say it better than Charles Spurgeon who wrote:

The church is not perfect, but woe to the man who finds pleasure in pointing out her imperfections! Christ loved His church; let us do the same. I have no doubt that the Lord can see more fault in His church than I can; and I have equal confidence that He sees no fault at all. Because He covers her faults with His own love—that love which covers a multitude of sins. He removes all her defilement with that precious blood which washes away all the transgressions of His people.

I think that's beautiful. Friend, you're going to be tempted to detach, to disengage, to grow cold. That temptation may come through a child who is on sports team, so you just have to miss, oh, just six or seven weeks of church in order for him or her to be a part of that. It won't be that much. But that compromise leads to more compromise, then before you know it, months have gone by. Before you know it, your heart has grown cold. Or it may be through a relationship within the church; there's someone you don't want to even see, someone you don't want to even look at.

Today the Lord is saying, "Oh, remember, she's My bride. Remember, I died for her. Let Me warm your heart afresh toward My church." It's one of the reasons we have this communion table.

### **An invitation to receive**

You may find yourself this morning on the outside looking in and you're hearing about this people of God who are created for the glory of God. There's this indestructible institution on the face of the earth because it's being built by Christ Himself to be a temple, a dwelling place for God the Spirit. There's this embassy of the heavenly church here on earth who is the bride of Christ—and you'd long to be a part of something like that. You'd long to be a part of something much

bigger than yourself. You'd long to have a family with whom you would experience a living, lasting, loving union with Christ and with one another forever.

Friend, if that's you, God is inviting you to His church today. He's welcoming you with open arms. He's calling you to join. How do you do that? You might think I'd start with the membership class we're having the first Saturday of October. But that's not where I'm going to start, because that's not where God starts. You don't become a part of God's church by going through the process of church membership.

You become a part of God's church by coming to Jesus, the Head of the church, saying, "I want to come under Your merciful rule and under Your loving Lordship, Jesus. Save me by Your grace and rule me in Your mercy and kindness." When you do that, friend, there's no fault in you that the Father is not willing to forgive. There's no defect in you that would make Jesus ashamed to embrace you as His brother or sister. There's no one who is a misfit in God's family. There's no one in God's family who is an unwanted child. God wants all His children—and He wants you. He's calling you. He's inviting you to come just as you are. He will forgive you, adopt you and set you apart as His holy and dearly loved child. He will also bring you into His church.

How do you join the church? First, you come to Jesus, then you come to the membership class. You come to Jesus first—and there's plenty of room in the house He is building. There are more than enough seats at His table. The door is wide open. Come home. Come to Jesus.

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