

Identity

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For all our modern mobility and global connectivity, we often feel an acute sense of loneliness and isolation. We are at once aware of everything and part of nothing. Graduation speeches wax eloquent on the limitless possibilities that lie before us. I've lost count of the number of times I've driven by Midlothian High School and been reminded to "reach for the stars." Yet the sheer number of options and the encouragement to go wherever you want to go and become whatever you want to be isn't comforting. It's frightening.

"You be you," feels like freedom, but it's ultimately disillusioning. It sets us up for an identity crisis where we have no clue who we really are or what we're supposed to be doing with our life. On the one hand, we love the freedom individual choice. On the other hand, we can't shake the hunger for a tethered sense of place and belonging that come from being part of something greater than ourselves.

The advertising industry knows as much. If you pull up the website for Recreational Equipment, Inc. (also known as REI) and navigate to their customer loyalty program, you won't find an invitation to become a frequent shopper. You'll find an invitation to become a member. The bold print at the top of the page says it all – "It's good to belong" – right above a picture of 4 women linking arms on top of a mountain overlook.

A sense of community is one of our deepest felt needs as human beings and all kinds of groups claim to offer as much. So what makes the church any different? Other groups have relationships. Other groups provide a sense of belonging. Other groups offer connections with like-minded people and a purpose greater than us to occupy our evenings and weekends.

I think many Christians would say the church is different, but they couldn't tell you exactly why. They couldn't say what sets the community of the church apart from every other organization on the planet. We're going to spend the next 4 weeks tackling this issue head on with a sermon series called, "A Community Like No Other." We're going to listen to what the Bible has to say about our identity, our mission, our authority, and our character as a church.

So what makes the community of the local church different? The Apostle Paul tells us in Eph 2:11-22. True community, authentic community, the kind of community

God made us to enjoy, isn't something we create for ourselves. It's something God creates for us in the church through the person and work of Christ. You won't find the sense of place you long for by linking arms with four women on a mountaintop. You won't find it by joining a private gym. You won't find it through social media, a club at school, or a senior group at the community center. Those are all communities we create for ourselves. The church is a community God creates FOR US by reconciling us to himself and uniting us to one another in Christ. That's what makes the church different. It's not rooted in the whims of man. It's the fruit of the saving work of God. And that's what makes the church a community like no other.

This is a rich passage of Scripture. I'm not going to make every point that could be made from this text. My goal is to simply help us understand two connections between what Jesus has done and the community the church enjoys as a result, ending with a practical call to live out our identity in Christ. Connection #1...

1) THOSE WHO ARE FAR OFF ARE BROUGHT NEAR IN CHRIST (vv. 11-13)

In v. 11, Paul urges the Christians in Ephesus to remember their past. He just finished reminding them in vv. 1-10 that everything God has done for them is a gift of grace, an expression of his undeserved favor. Now he wants them to appreciate just how kind God has been by reminding them of who they were before God intervened in their life.

Remember, Ephesians, that you were once "Gentiles in the flesh." In 1st century Judaism, there were two groups in the world – Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were God's chosen people, the object of his particular favor and blessing. From the very beginning of the nation, God made it clear that his redemptive purposes would eventually spread to every nation on earth. But they didn't start with every tribe and tongue. They began with the children of Israel.

The Jews identified themselves as God's people through circumcision – a physical act intended to reflect a consecration of heart to the Lord and his purposes. Everyone else was a Gentile or more derogatively, "the uncircumcision." So why would Paul remind the Ephesian Christians of their status as Gentiles? Why bring up the age-old ethnic distinction? Because it wasn't just an ethnic distinction. It was an ethnic distinction with significant spiritual consequences.

To be a Gentile was (v. 12) to be "separated from Christ." Paul isn't speaking here primarily of their former lack of faith or trust in Jesus. He's referring to the fact that

the promised Messiah, the One who would deliver God's people from sin and death, was sent first to the Jews, NOT to the Gentiles. As Jesus himself said in Jn 4:22, "Salvation is from the Jews."

Gentiles were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." If you wanted to experience the blessing of a relationship with God, you had to become a Jew. You couldn't remain a Gentile. As a result, they were also "strangers to the covenant of promise." Throughout the Old Testament, God's relationship with his chosen people was defined and carried along by oath-bound promises called covenants. Covenants with representative leaders like Abraham, Moses, and David told the Israelites exactly what sort of favor and blessing they could expect from God and what God required of them. As Gentiles, the Ephesians had no such guarantee of relationship with the Lord.

Now perhaps you're wondering, "Why is all of that a big deal?" I mean, doesn't God love everyone? I suppose it would have been nice to be a Jew, but seriously, was it really that bad to be a Gentile? Look at what Paul says next. V. 12, they had "no hope." Have you ever felt that, friend? Have you hit a point in your life where you felt absolutely hopeless? For the Gentiles, it wasn't just a passing feeling. It was a spiritual reality.

Why do I say that? Because in the Bible, hope isn't about the size of your retirement fund, an opportunity for promotion at work, or a vacation around the corner. Hope rises and falls on the tide of a single issue - whether you are right with God. What comes into God's mind when he thinks of you is the most important thing about you. It's what ultimately determines whether you have hope, whether you can anticipate an eternity of joy with the Lord in heaven or an eternity of judgment away from the presence of the Lord in hell.

To be separated from God's Messiah, separated from God's people, and separated from God's saving promises was to face a guaranteed future of eternal death. It was the very definition of hopelessness. And to make matters even worse, during their life in this world, Gentiles were, finally, "without God." God isn't "with" everyone, friends. His presence to comfort, sustain, deliver and guide is exclusively reserved for his people. There is no greater joy than the joy of being "with God" and there is no greater sorrow than the sorrow being "without God."

There are plenty of horror films being produced today with all manner of spiritually frightening scenes. But there is nothing, absolutely nothing, more frightening than

being “without God.” For the Ephesians, no less than for Gentiles like you and me, our situation in the past couldn’t be worse.

Far from God. Far from God’s people. No hope. That’s what it meant to be a Gentile. But the story doesn’t end there. For our sake, friends, praise God the story doesn’t end there! V. 13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ shattered the ethnic boundaries of God’s saving activity. Being near to God no longer depends on being part of a particular ethnic group. Nor is it about whether you’re a “good” person or a “bad” person. Being near to God, enjoying the gift of relationship with him in this life and in the world to come depends entirely on whether or not you are “in Christ.”

The old categories of Jew and Gentile have been superseded by an entirely new distinction. Enjoying God’s favor and blessing is no longer about your relationship to the ethnic people of Israel. It’s about your relationship with Jesus. To be “in Christ” is to be united TO Jesus through faith IN Jesus, a faith that TRUSTS his death on the cross in your place for the forgiveness of your sins and a faith that OBEYS his word in every area of your life. To be “in Christ” is to embrace the obedience of faith. To be far from Christ, is to reject the obedience of faith.

Those who are far off are brought near in Christ. That’s what Paul says has happened to the Ephesians. So HOW did Jesus accomplish that? Vv. 14-18 fill in the details. And here’s where the second connection between the person and work of Christ and the community of the church comes into focus.

2) TO BE RECONCILED TO GOD IS TO BE UNITED WITH HIS PEOPLE (vv. 14-18)

Look at v. 14. This is one of the most theologically dense sections in the entire book so we need to think slowly and carefully. Thankfully, Paul starts out with a summary of the whole section. V. 14, “For he himself is our peace.” Jesus Christ is our peace. Not Jesus brings peace or Jesus offers peace. Jesus IS our peace. Why? He’s our peace BECAUSE he “has made us both one.”

In context, “us both” is a reference to who? Jew and Gentiles. Making Jew and Gentiles “one” is another way of saying Jesus united Jews and Gentiles. He took two separate groups and reconstituted them into one new group. How did he do that?

He broke down “in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.”

It’s easy to look at the 1st century animosity between Jews and Gentiles and conclude, “Really, guys? Can’t y’all just get along? Stop being so divisive and love one another.” No question, much of the “hostility” between them was due to the sin of pride and resentment. But the root of the issue, the foundation of the wall of division, wasn’t a product of the sin of man. It was a product of the sovereign will of God. For it was the law of God, established under the Mosaic covenant, that ultimately separated the Jews from the Gentiles.

From not eating certain foods to keeping the Sabbath, the commands in the law were designed by God to set apart his people from the rest of the peoples. It was a distinction God himself created to reveal his holiness. So what did Jesus do? He abolished or nullified the Mosaic law by fulfilling the Mosaic law. Matt 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Jesus isn’t contradicting Paul. He’s reminding us that he didn’t just show up and do away with the law by executive fiat. Through his perfect life of obedience, he kept, honored, and ultimately fulfilled all the commandments of the law on our behalf. The Mosaic law is still exceedingly beneficial for it instructs us in the character and will of God, but it is no longer our master in a covenantal sense. Or as Douglas Moo says, it “is not a direct and immediate guide to the new covenant believer.” We have to understand and apply all of it in light of the person and work of Christ and the new covenant he has established through his blood.

So why did Jesus abolish the law and the wall of separation it preserved between Jew and Gentile? He had two goals in view. FIRST, (v. 15) “to create in himself one new man in the place of the two, so making peace.” The law preserved two different groups. It invited one to draw near to God (Jews) and kept the other away (Gentiles). Jesus took those two groups and did away with the separation and hostility between them by uniting both of them to himself and forming an entirely new race, a new humanity defined not by their obedience to the law, but rather by their union with Christ.

Listen, if you’re in Christ, then you have more in common with a brother or sister who doesn’t look like you, dress like you, talk like you, or speak like you than someone who does all of those things! Why is that? Because both of you have been



united to Christ, and if you are united to him, then you are also united to everyone else who is united to him.

Uniting people to one another, creating peace between men where before there was no peace, is one of Jesus' primary goals in abolishing the law. But there's a SECOND goal that can't be separated from the first and apart from which the first would never be accomplished. V. 16, Jesus abolished the law, that he "might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." Reconciliation in Christ works in two directions. Jesus reconciles Jews and Gentiles to one another, and he reconciles both of us to God.

How does he do that? Through his work on the cross. As Paul said back in v. 13, we are brought near "by the blood of Christ." What does Jesus blood do? It satisfies the justice of God. It placates the wrath of God against our sin. It pays the penalty we owe for our rebellion – death – so that we can receive the free gift of eternal life. Apart from the cross, there is no reconciliation to God, there is no intimacy with God, there is no relationship with God, because it is only through the cross that God makes a way for us to be right with himself.

And notice the not-so-subtle implication in v. 16. BOTH Jews and Gentiles need to be reconciled to God. They had the law, but they couldn't keep the law. We're all sinners. That's why we all need Jesus. It's only through what Jesus has done on our behalf that we can know the joy of being at peace with God.

Where does all of this reconciling work go down? Where does it happen? It happens in the community of the church. The "one body" in which Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God in v. 16 is the body of the church. Eph 1:23, speaking of Christ, "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body..."

To be reconciled to God in Christ is to be united with his people in Christ. You can't have one without the other. You can't be connected to the head – Christ – without also being connected to his body – the church. You can't be on good terms with God if you're not on good terms with his people. We don't tend to think that way, do we? We tend to think of Christianity as a me and Jesus thing. We ask questions like, "Do you have a personal relationship with God?" and treat our spiritual life as an entirely private matter.

Sadly, even in the church, it's easy to live a self-focused, self-centered life where we keep to ourselves, take care of the kids, pay the bills, and hit repeat. When we do that, friends, when the pattern of our life reflects something less than wholehearted, week-in-and-week-out, pursuit of relationship with other Christians, we are functionally denying the work Christ has done in uniting us to one another when he reconciled us to God. To be reconciled with God is to be united to his people. Now for the practical implication...

3) THE COMMUNITY OF THE CHURCH IS OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST (vv. 19-22)

If I asked you, Christian, why should you pursue community, what would you say? Why do anything more than attend a meeting on Sunday morning? Why embrace a lifestyle of relationship with other Christians throughout the week where other people know the real you and you know them? Narrowing the question to our practice at KingsWay, why should you participate in a community group? Why share life with a small group of 8-10 adults who are on a mission to help one another follow Jesus?

Whenever I ask this question, most people say something like, "We should pursue community because we all have needs. We all have challenges. And we need help and support from each other to get through them." Is that true? Do we need to give help and receive help? Absolutely. But you realize, I hope, there's nothing particularly Christian about that answer. Plenty of people in the world would say as much. And few other religious groups would disagree.

Then of course there's the fact that if your whole rationale for participating in Christian community is centered on getting help with your challenges or helping other people with their challenges, what are you going to do when everything seems pretty stable? No major issues. No difficult decisions. No felt need for community. Maybe I'll just stay home tonight.

Enter Eph 2:19-22. In these verses, the Apostle Paul takes the two main points we just considered and presses home a conclusion that completely redefines our motivation for pursuing community as Christians. Look at v. 19. "SO THEN (in light of Christ reconciling us to God and one another) you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens the saints and members of the household of God..."



He doesn't say, "Hey Ephesians, in light of everything God has done for you, why don't y'all show up at church or attend CG more often?" He doesn't address their activity – though there are abundant implications here for the way we live. He addresses their IDENTITY, their sense of self, who they understand themselves to be. In other words, because you are "in Christ" a fundamental change has taken place not only in where you will spend eternity, but also in the core of your identity.

Notice how Paul answers the, "Who are you?" question for the Ephesians. You are FELLOW CITIZENS and you are MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD. That's your identity. Once you were not part of God's people. Now you are part of God's people. It's the complete reversal of the opening situation in vv. 11-12 and the change isn't personal. It's corporate. If you're in Christ, you're part of a new body. A new society. A new family. A new building where Christ Jesus is the cornerstone. A holy temple. But what do every one of those images have in common? They're corporate. They're not individual. What does that tell us? It tells us that the community of the church isn't the product of our problems, it's not the product of our weaknesses, it's not here because we all have issues. The community of the church is our identity in Christ.

It's who we are. It's not an event we attend. To the degree we think like it is and live like it is, we are living in denial of our identity. We're pretending to be someone we're not. We're acting like solo Christianity is just fine when in reality it doesn't exist. It's not a biblical category because Jesus shed his blood to purchase something completely different. The community of the church is our identity in Christ.

And let's the Ephesians relegate that identity to some sort of nebulous, universal church, we're all one in Jesus, concept, Paul adds in v. 22. "Oh, and by the way, "in him, YOU ALSO (Ephesians...In your local context) are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." When God unites us to himself, he also unites us to a local expression of the church. That's why church membership is so important. By affirming and overseeing our mutual profession of faith, we are embracing our identity in Christ.

Everyone who is united to Christ is united to a local expression of his body. Why? Because it's our identity in Christ. Living in community is the intended result of an obedient response to the gospel. Now think about this.



When life is busy, our identity in Christ doesn't change. When life is peaceful, our identity in Christ doesn't change. When we feel our need for other people, our identity in Christ doesn't change. When we feel like being alone, our identity in Christ doesn't change. If someone says something in small group that offends you, your identity in Christ hasn't changed. If the leader seems a bit awkward and has a lot of room to grow, your identity in Christ hasn't changed. If you tend to be an introvert, your identity in Christ hasn't changed. If you've been hurt in the past when you opened up, your identity in Christ hasn't changed. We're not consumers looking for a church to give us a low-cost, low-stress, sense of belonging. We're members of the household of God called to live out our corporate identity through thick and thin.

How do you know if you're embracing or denying your identity in Christ? How do you know if you're living out your corporate identity by living in community with the other members of our church? Consider this: Is there at least one other person in this congregation, ideally someone in your community group, who knows the real you and with whom you are consistently sharing and navigating the sorrows and joys of life?

Don't wait to be asked. Don't wait for someone else to drag your identity out of you. Embrace it. Pursue it. Live it out. Be vulnerable. And if the answer is no, or if the answer is someone used to, but not anymore, humble yourself and acknowledge to the Lord that you're denying through your life what Jesus died to create, what Jesus died to reconcile, what Jesus died to form, and what Jesus died to build. The strength of our pursuit of community as a church is one of the surest indicators of the strength of our understanding of the truth of the gospel as a church.

By the grace of God, we've been a church that's heard the gospel preached week after week for 30 years. Let's not assume that just because we're hearing the gospel that we're living out the entailments of the gospel. Be honest. Where do you need to grow in your pursuit of community? Do you need to prioritize our Sunday gatherings? Do you need to join a community group? Maybe you need to actively participate in the life and relationships of a community group instead of just attending a meeting. Maybe you need to spend some time talking and praying with another brother or sister outside of a "formal" meeting.

Remember, community isn't an event. It's not one more activity in a life full of competing activities. It involves events. It involves activities. First and foremost,



however, the community of the church is our identity in Christ. It's who we are before it's what we do.

CONCLUSION

You know what I'm grateful for? I'm grateful that although pursuing community is hard work and tends to be really messy, it's not something we ultimately create for ourselves. That's good news, brothers and sisters. We're not trying to run around and have a whole bunch of conversations or send a whole bunch of text messages or make a whole bunch of meals and host a whole bunch of events until finally, one day, we become the kind of community we're supposed to be. That's an exhausting rat race and one I'm not remotely interested in leading.

Remember, we don't create community. As a pastor, I don't create community. The best CGL in the world can't create community. Those who are far off are BROUGHT near IN CHRIST. When God reconciles us to himself, HE unites us to his people. We don't do that. God does that. Jesus creates community! So what's our role? To diligently discover in every season of life how to live out our identity in Christ as a church such that all we do as believers – loving the Lord and loving our neighbors – is all done in the context of community.

As Paul reminded the Ephesians in v. 22, we have great hope for the battle in the Holy Spirit who dwells among us. Let's take some time right now to ask for his help.