

## What Does the Bible Teach About Meeting as Believers?

### The identity of Believers in Jesus Christ

A common question that arises especially when Christians first become acquainted is, “What church do you attend?” or “Who do you meet with?” While these questions in themselves are not evil, they do open a door to an improper way of assessing a believer in Christ. The important question that all believers in Jesus Christ should address is “What is my identity in Christ?”

**“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.*”** 1 Peter 3:15

This verse tells us to prepare to identify ourselves when persecution comes. Hopefully, believers in Jesus will not tell an unbeliever or a person mocking their faith that they are a Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, etc. as their defense and reason for believing in Jesus, but rather witness to Jesus Christ and proclaim the virtues of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light by faith in Him (1 Peter 2:9).

Unfortunately, when believers address each other, it is all-too-common for most to take on an identity that is not found in scripture. We can argue whether denomination and independent churches are right or wrong, but the central issue is our identity in Jesus Christ. All believers should have the same confession based on the same identity:

**“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus.”** Hebrews 3:1  
**“Let us hold fast the confession of *our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.*”** Hebrews 10:23

Our confession and our identity are entirely focused and centered on Jesus Christ.  
**What Does the Scripture Record About Our Identity in Christ?**

Paul addressed the negative segregation issue with Peter and others who made a distinction between themselves and the Gentiles. He said, **I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.** Galatians 2:20

In Acts 21, some saints had begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem where almost certain death awaited him. His response: **13 Then Paul answered, “What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”** His identity was completely summed up in the Lord Jesus.

In Romans 6 we are **baptized into Christ Jesus** (6:3). **We have died with Christ** (6:8). We are **alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord** (6:11) whom we obey. And **16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?** There is no mention of culture, race, Biblical interpretation, denomination or free group, but Christ alone.

The Acts of the Apostles begins with **“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach”** (1:1). Every epistle of the New Testament begins with a recognition of the author’s identity. Romans 1:1 **a bondservant of Jesus Christ**; 1 Corinthians 1:1 **a called apostle of Christ Jesus**; 2 Corinthians 1:1 **an apostle of Christ Jesus**; Galatians 1:1 **an apostle through Jesus Christ and God the Father**; Ephesians 1:1 **an apostle of Christ Jesus**; Philippians 1:1 **slaves of Christ Jesus**; Colossians 1:1 **an apostle of Christ Jesus**; 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1:1 **in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**; 1 & 2 Timothy **an apostle of Christ Jesus**; Titus 1:1 **a slave of God and an apostle of Christ Jesus**; Philemon 1:1 **a prisoner of Christ Jesus**; Hebrews starts with **God and His Son**; James 1:1 **a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**; 1 Peter 1:1 **an apostle of Jesus Christ**; 2 Peter 1:1 **a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ**; 1 John 1:1-4 **the word of life ... with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ**; 2 John 3 **from God the Father and from Jesus Christ**; 3 John 7 **on behalf of the Name** (Jesus Christ is implied); Jude 1 **a slave of Jesus Christ**; and Revelation 1:1 **the revelation of Jesus Christ**.

It is noteworthy that most of the epistles addressed the “*ekklesia*” (called out assembly which is translated ‘church’ in the New Testament) in some form. When John wrote the book of Revelation, he specifically addressed seven churches. To each church, he wrote brief epistles that identified with Jesus Christ in one or more of His attributes and actions (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The overarching point is that our identity is in Jesus Christ, not in a teaching, not in another grouping, and not based on anything other than the Person and Work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Why, then, are Christians so quick to identify with other things?

One of the most quoted scriptures in the New Testament gives us profound insight into our identity as believers in Jesus Christ. These verses state who we are to God, which sets us apart from all other people. It shows why we are distinct among the masses. It gives us the defense and reason for our faith in Christ and reaffirms our commission to preach the gospel continually.

**9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:9-10**

Believers in Jesus Christ are one race, one kingly priesthood, one holy nation, and one people of God. This is our true identity and no other distinctions should be given. Notice the matter of oneness and unity.

**4 For just as we have many parts in one body and all the body's parts do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually parts of one another.** Romans 12:4-5

**For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him.** Romans 10:12

The only grounds for distinction or division among believers in Jesus Christ is false teaching, immorality, and disobedience to God and His word. **“No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.”** (1 Corinthians 11:19) However, this does not mean we establish an identity apart from that which the Lord gives us.

- The Bible instructs us to take notice of false teachers and to avoid them (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6).
- The Bible talks about the teachings of men (Mark 7:7-8), the teachings of demons (1 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 2:24), and the teachings of God (John 6:45; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 John 2:27). Therefore, it is important that we **“Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”** (1 John 4:1)

In the Old Testament oneness is typified by the one Jewish race, the one nation of Israel, who are the one people of God under the authority of the prophets and kings

with the priesthood based on the Old Covenant law. The entire Bible centers around this principle and very little is mentioned of other peoples, nations, races, and world history unless they were directly involved with God's people.

Our God-created human nature desires to have unity and oneness. The problem lies in trying to obtain it in the old creation.

- Many religions strive for oneness and purity, attempting to outwardly emulate the principle of one race, one nation, and one people. They force everyone to comply by outward means to the exclusion of everyone else. They establish government, military, and community culture that forces all to comply even to the point of capital punishment for those who resist.
- There are many examples of this:
  - Countries like Iran, Iraq, and Mauritania try to establish an Islamic state with Sharia law.
  - Hitler did this with the Aryan race and Nazi precepts (governing).
  - India attempts to set up a Hindu state, governing based on Hindu principles.
  - Cambodia, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Laos and Mongolia attempt to do the same with Buddhism.
  - Russia, China, and North Korea have all established atheistic communism with the same goal.
- It is clear that in the old creation, it is impossible to create or exist as one race, constituting one nation and representing one people. There is no one identity for all people. On the contrary, there are many races based on many cultures, establishing many nations, incorporating many different groups of people. God Himself at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) separated people, resulting in many cultures and many nations.

God has always desired oneness and unity among His people, but the New Testament unveils a new creation in which all believers have one identity: the one new man. There are not many distinct groups of believers in Jesus; only one. Paul wrote that Christ removed any distinction, any dividing wall, among His people:

**For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh**

**the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.**

Ephesians 2:14-16

**You have taken off your old self [man] with its practices 10 and have put on the new self [man], which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ... Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.** Colossians 3:9-10, 15

Our identity in Christ is related to being united with Him in His death and resurrection and by us "putting off the old" and "putting on the new" (Ephesians 4:22-24). This is the way we practically enter into the reality of a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Only in the new creation can believers be truly born as one heavenly race from the same Father, governed by a divine priesthood with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and Mediator, established as one nation under the Headship (obedience to His word) of Jesus Christ, and living as one people of God, bearing the name of Jesus Christ alone, who tell out His virtues with one voice. Christ's redemptive work broke down all the barriers, boundaries, and potential rifts between His children. There was no greater separation than Jew and Gentile based on the Old Covenant. But we live in the new creation with a New Covenant.

In the new creation, Christ's love compels us to lay down our old creation lives and live in resurrection according to the new creation life within us.

**14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 2**

Corinthians 5:14-17

In Christ, we lose our old identity, which includes our ability to choose and live for ourselves. Almost all distinctions and divisions among believers in Jesus arise out of living for oneself in the old creation. In Christ, we become a new creation and need to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4). Unfortunately, Christians continue to live as if they belong to the old creation, however, and knowingly or

unknowingly use the old creation to promote their interpretation of what God wants. For example, various groups of people and denominations have formed or created identities based on:

- **Culture:** Culture includes the customs, traditions, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.
- There are many examples of culture that exist in a society or in a church.
  1. Acts 15 ... A conference was held in Jerusalem because the Jewish believers were mandating circumcision as a pre-requisite to salvation. At that time, it is possible that the Jews who believed in Jesus did not know that there was no longer any distinction between them and the Gentiles. They may not have known the New Testament way that no longer required the outward Old Testament ordinances like circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, and dietary laws. Today, Messianic Jews may be regenerated believers in Jesus, but their theology continues to include circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, Jewish holidays, and Jewish dietary laws from the Old Testament. While it may not be sinful to continue these Old Testament ordinances, it is cultural and gives an identity other than what Jesus and the New Testament teaches.
  2. Galatians 2 ... Paul rebuked Peter for segregation against the Gentiles. Peter had the vision in Acts 11 that Gentiles were included in God's salvation. He spoke up in Acts 15, "**Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.**" Peter succumbed to the "Jewish" culture of segregation that God Himself told him to lay aside.
  3. Colossians 2:16-23 ... Holding feasts, new moons, festivals, Sabbath, etc., asceticism, worldly ordinances are cultural because the New

Testament did not include them as part of our salvation. The issue here is whether the participants experience the reality of what they practice. If not, it is cultural, not spiritual.

4. Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter that include pagan rituals and worldly events (egg hunts; chocolate rabbits, gift giving, decorations, etc.) damage the sanctity of God's will. Yet, Christians around the world practice such things and even use them in their gospel preaching.
5. Many countries and/or religions include pagan, immoral, and ungodly rituals. Illicit rites of passage and licentious revelry are often expected. Believers in Christ should not participate in these cultural events because we cannot identify with those things any longer.
6. Arranged marriage and polygamy were and may still be acceptable institutions in some cultures. These should not be our identity and forced upon others because they are not Biblical commands, but narratives. On another note, in some cultures taking a mistress is practiced, but that certainly should not be identified with Christ.
7. 1 Peter 3:3 Women adorning themselves with makeup and jewelry. Wearing pants versus dresses. The issue is not the outward plaiting or apparel, but the reality of Christ within the heart. If a woman does not have a meek and quiet spirit in her heart then she lives in a culture rather than a reality of Christ.
8. The Puritans forced 5+ hour meetings which were strict. They used poles to beat congregants who moved or fell asleep. They used stocks to publicly humiliate the disobedient or noncompliant. The Puritans had many positive aspects, but their excessive strictness was a cultural matter that is not condoned by most.
9. Mega church culture includes casual dress, cappuccino, strobe lights, fog, entertainment, dramatic plays, music band, professional productions, etc. None of these things are a problem until they become part of our identity in addition to Christ. In other words, you expect them as part of your spiritual walk.
10. Each individual church establishes its liturgy based on culture. (Prelude, call to worship, hymns, pastoral prayer, offertory, Bible reading, sermon, postlude). Even the way people greet each other is



based on culture. Organizing children's service versus children staying with parents can be cultural.

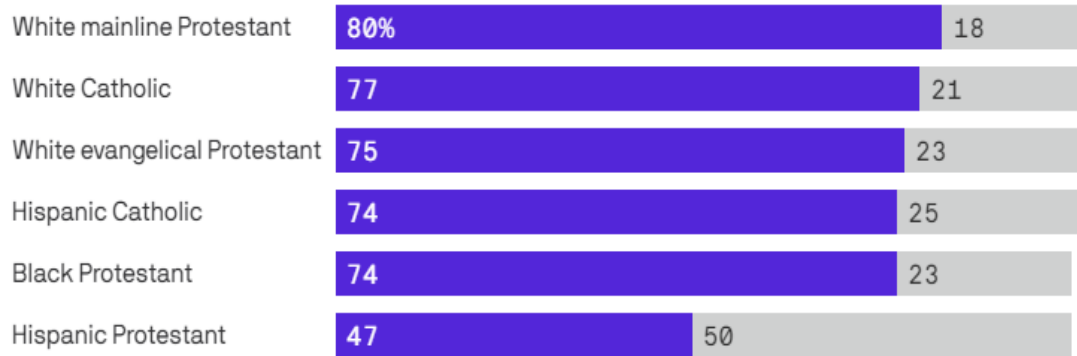
11. The building and furnishings are often based on culture; e.g. large cathedral versus simple meeting hall; pews versus chairs (how comfortable are they?); hymnals versus sheet music with projection of words.
  12. Culture can be molded according to age (elderly people prefer a very different atmosphere than young people), socioeconomic status (the wealthy, powerful, or worldly leaders are treated differently than others), race, nationality, etc.
  13. Many sound Biblical teachings may become cultural. For instance, 1 Corinthians 11:5 says, "**But every woman praying or prophesying with her head unveiled dishonoreth her head**". Head covering is a sign of authority. Do all women who wear head coverings submit to God's authority, including their husbands? No. Another example is that many people partake of the Lord's supper (communion), but have no reality or relationship with Jesus Christ personally. They have not examined themselves before the Lord to be worthy of partaking. "**Wherefore whosoever shall eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself ...**" (11:27)
- A sign that culture has become established is the fact that people resist change.
    - The Lord Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, which offended the religious Jews because it violated their culture. Jesus did not break the law: "**Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."** Matthew 12:10-12
    - Again, the Lord upset the religious Jewish culture in invoking the power to forgive sins, which they considered blasphemy (Luke 5:17-26). Then, He ate with "tax collectors and sinners" which was considered a breach of etiquette (5:27-31). The Lord concluded by saying, "**37 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.**"



**Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. 39 And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'**" (Luke 5:37-39) The wineskins here can include culture (among other things). People prefer the old culture over change to something new. The Lord has called us to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Established culture resists this.

- The extreme of culture invading the purity of Christ's church is when a person identifies as a Christian but they don't have a personal relationship with Jesus. Cultural Christians believe that they became a Christian through attending church, by being baptized and by being a good person. This kind of culture is not exclusive to Christianity, but exists throughout the world and its religions. There are many Islamic cultural countries that are atheistic in theology, but Muslim in culture. India attempts to establish a pure Hindu nation by force despite having 1.5 billion people, many or most of whom do not practice the reality of Hinduism.
- Culture also can include aspects of national pride, racial and ethnic bias, political affiliation (republican, democrat, libertarian, independent), etc. People often default to the status quo rather than test the spirits to see what is of God day by day (1 John 4:1).
- **Race:** Ethnicity can act as a powerful base of identity, group formation and communal conflict. Hispanic churches, African American churches, Caucasian churches, Vietnamese churches, Korean churches, etc. All of these represent potential divisions in the Body of Christ. Racial segregation has long been a point of contention. Race also promotes culture. An African American church service varies greatly from an Anglican service, etc.
  - The vast majority of U.S. churchgoers, a new survey found, report that they belong to congregations where most people are of their race or ethnicity.
  - "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation ... that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America," Martin Luther King Jr. said in [1960 on "Meet the Press."](#)
  - Survey of 5,872 adults between Aug. 9-30, 2022

## How Do Christians Meet?



- **Preference:** people chose a church or attend a particular meeting based on personal preference which usually does not issue from obedience to Christ.
  - Personal preference includes an endless list: liturgy, Bible version, socioeconomic status, nationality, practices, traditions, historic precedent, racial bias, political affiliation, culture, family, liturgy, instrumentation (music band, piano, organ), volume, order, etc.
  - 1 Corinthians 1:10 shows an example of preference based on a person: “**I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ.**” The apostle Paul denounced this kind of preference.
  - People debate or separate over stained glass windows, leavened or unleavened wafers and grape juice or wine for communion, women greeters and leaders, short sermons and keeping the established time frame, standing at the reading of scripture, going to the front to partake of communion or giving one’s tithe, casual versus more formal attire, version of the Bible, etc.
- **Interpretations of the Bible:** It is estimated that 5,000 to 45,000 denominations exist globally!
  - The cause for distinction and division among believers is almost endless [infant versus adult baptism, head covering, tongue speaking, apostles no longer exist versus they do, holy days, sacraments, church buildings (cathedrals, “temples”, versus meeting halls), liturgy (agenda of meetings), no outward adornment versus casual dress, piano, organ, instruments versus no instruments, pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation, amillennial, eternal security, election versus free will, church government, following the worldly government absolutely versus standing against an unjust government (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14),

- music bands versus choirs, women's role (pastor, deacon, etc.), infant salvation and confirmation versus believing when one comes to age, version of the Bible, etc. etc. etc.].
- If “**20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**” [2 Peter 1:20-21] is true, why are there so many private interpretations?
  - Who decides which interpretations are the most important?
  - The Bible denounces distinction among believers based on race, culture, socioeconomic status, nationality, political and personal preference, etc. All believers in Christ should have **one identity**: son of God. The existence of denominations creates a fine line between obedience to Christ in keeping His name alone and His word alone versus allowing other things to leaven the lump (culture, race, preference, interpretation, etc.); Galatians 3:27-29.
    - **[The new man] in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all, and in all.** Colossians 3:11
    - **27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.** Galatians 3:27-29
    - **12 For just as the body is one and yet has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.** 1 Corinthians 12:12-13
    - **25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. ... 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it.** 1 Corinthians 12:25, 27

- **“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it”** (Titus 1:9).
  - Proper Biblical interpretation (sound doctrine) promotes a number of healthy spiritual ends. Sound doctrine delivers us from the snare of false teaching (2 Tim. 2:24–26; Titus 1:9-11), which otherwise threatens to arrest spiritual development (Eph. 4:14) and to foster ecclesiastical discord (Rom. 16:17). Healthy teaching serves God’s saving work both inside (1 Tim. 4:16) and outside the church (Matt. 5:13-16; Titus 2:9–10; 1 Peter 3:1–6). Above all, doctrine promotes God's glory. Sound doctrine with proper Biblical interpretation shines forth as one of the glorious rays of the gospel of God (1 Tim. 1:10–11) and, by directing our faith and love toward God in Christ, it enables us to walk in His presence and give Him the glory He deserves (1 Peter 4:11; 2 Peter 3:18).
  - God loves us; and in His goodness He has given us the good gift of doctrine (Psalms 119:68) that we might learn of Him and of His gospel, and that we might please Him in our walk. Doctrine is the teaching of our heavenly Father, revealed in Jesus Christ, and transmitted to us by the Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture, and it is to be received, confessed, and followed in the church, to the glory of God’s name.
- While the Bible does teach us that sound doctrine with proper interpretation is needed, there are also other high priorities related to how we deal with others in relation to Biblical interpretation:
  - **And the Lord’s servant must not strive, but be gentle towards all, apt to teach, forbearing, 25 in meekness correcting them that oppose themselves; if peradventure God may give them repentance unto the knowledge of the truth,** 2 Timothy 2:24-25
  - We should **“speak evil of no man, not to be contentious, to be gentle, showing all meekness toward all men.”** Titus 3:2
  - We must **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.** 1 Tim. 6:11 This would include all the fruits of the Spirit: **love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 meekness, self-control.** (Galatians 5:22-23).

- It is interesting to note that “peace” is a high priority in God’s word. This is because fallen man easily tends toward strife, contention, and warfare, and this includes Christians throughout church history.
  - **Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.** 2 Timothy 2:22; Isaiah 51:1
  - **Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.** Hebrews 12:14
  - **Pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.** Romans 14:19
  - **And let the peace of Christ arbitrate in your hearts, to which also ye were called in one body; and be ye thankful.** Colossians 3:15
- So, why are there so many denominations all claiming they identify with Jesus Christ? Denomination is a recognized autonomous branch of the Christian Church, implying there's more than one established group since there are many denominations. The word denomination comes from the Latin denominare meaning “to name.”
  - By nature, each denomination or independent church has its own identity. This includes semantics, liturgy, hierarchy of authority, participation of members or attendees, type of building, etc.
  - Denominations are often built on elevating a person, a theology, or a constitution that does not focus on Jesus Christ alone (His name), or His word alone. Revelation 3:8.
  - **10 Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brothers and sisters, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am with [follow] Paul,” or “I am with [follow] Apollos,” or “I am with [follow] Cephas,” or “I am with [follow] Christ.” 13 Has Christ been divided?** 1 Corinthians 1:10-13

## “Ekklesia”

*Ekklesia* is a Greek word defined as “a called-out assembly or congregation.” Some scholars interpret *ekklesia* in the New Testament simply as an “assembly”. The implication of “*ekklesia*”, however, is that the “*ekklesia*” is a called-out assembly from the world into Christ’s one body.

The important issue in the Body of Christ is whether culture, race, preference, and interpretation of scripture produces an identity other than Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, there are no distinctions from one “*ekklesia*” to another in terms of identity as with denominations and many independent churches (e.g. Baptist church, Roman Catholic church, Methodist church, Grace Brethren, etc. all represent distinctions with alternative identities). All believers in Christ should only identify as the one race, as the one royal priesthood, as the one holy nation, and as the one people of God. Believers in Christ are those whom **God has rescued from the power of darkness and has brought into the kingdom of his Son, whom he loves.** (Colossians 1:13)

The term “church” tends to go far beyond “*ekklesia*” to mean a particular group of people with an identity that is defined by their culture, race, preference or interpretation of scripture. Often, when people think of “going to church” they are not referring to a called-out assembly, but to a specific denomination or independent group of people with a specific theology, liturgy, and identity. Church connotes a building to many people. Even politics pits “church against state” including all religions, which certainly is not what the Lord Jesus had in mind when He said, “**I will build My church**” (Matthew 16:18). He was referring to the called-out believers who separate themselves from the world and identify with Christ alone.

The Lord Himself said, “**I will build My church**” (Matthew 16:18). Matthew recorded the Lord’s words in one of the earliest of the New Testament books. It came before any thought of ecclesiastical liturgy and organization was developed. In fact, the Lord Jesus did not speak one word about a church organization. His main ministry was to preach the gospel of His kingdom to all people, to emphasize that love is the greatest commandment, and to bring judicial redemption and organic salvation to the world. It seems that some Christians add in culture, race, preference, and Biblical interpretation to the matter of planting and building so-called churches. We need to go “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:12-13) and allow the Lord Himself to build the church, not imposing culture, race, preference, and Biblical interpretation. For example, do we expect people to come to our church

(culture, race, preference, and Biblical interpretation) or do we go and make disciples based on the Lord's leading and bring Christ to people where they are at?

### **Two Aspects of Ekklesia**

Based on Matthew's writing in 16:18 and 18:15-20, there are two aspects of the "ekklesia". In Matthew 16:18, the Lord's words, "**I will build my church**" seem to indicate the Body of Christ universally. Whereas Matthew 18:15-17 seem to be more practical and localized. We need both aspects of the church (ekklesia). The practical aspect includes the gathering of 2 or 3 in Jesus' name, constituting the building blocks of the church. These building blocks incorporate reproof, confession, and accountability among the 2 or 3, and most importantly having Christ in their midst to do His will especially related to forgiveness. Matthew 18 also implies that there is a larger corporate expression ("**tell it to the ekklesia**" which is other than the 2 or 3). Paul wrote that many aspects of ministries with gifts and functions are necessary for the perfecting of the saints unto proper growth in life, for maturity in Christ so that we all grow up into Christ as the Head (Ephesians 4:1-16).

How does the Lord build His church, His ekklesia? He uses the building blocks (2 or 3) and the gifts and functions of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. Anywhere that Christ is in the midst of ones gathered in His name constitutes an aspect of the church at least in its simplest form. Matthew 18 speaks of harmony and gathering into His name with 2 or 3, which is an aspect of the Body of Christ, the church. A brother has the ability and ground to rebuke another brother. If the sinning brother does not repent, then another brother or 2 are brought along. This is the 2 or 3 gathered in Christ's name to incorporate forgiveness as a building block. Where is this aspect of the ekklesia in today's organized churches?

### **Love is the Greatest Commandment**

The fulfillment and foundation of the principle in 1 Peter 2:9-10 is love. Those who have entered the reality of one race, one nation with the Royal priesthood as the one people of God possess the love of Christ and exhibit love for one another (1 Peter 1:22; John 13:34-35; Galatians 5:13; 1 John 3:14; 4:7-8; 1 Corinthians 13). Peter wrote that the issue of obedience to the truth is unfeigned brotherly love which is fervent and from the heart (1 Peter 1:22). He continued to exhort believers to love the brotherhood (2:17), to love the brothers (3:9), and, "**Above all, have fervent love among yourselves.**" (4:8)



The greatest commandment the Lord Jesus Himself proclaimed is love (John 13:34-35). The Lord did not place Biblical interpretation above the love of Christ expressed among His believers. Love should be the highest priority teaching, doctrine, and interpretation of the Bible that all believers in Christ not only adhere to, but insist on.

The church in Corinth was admonished by the apostle Paul in many practical and theological aspects, but he emphasized that love was the greatest of all virtues to be practiced and expressed in the church (1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:1-13). In chapter 8, he addresses the place of knowledge as compared to love: **“1 Knowledge puffs up while love builds up. 2 Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. 3 But whoever loves God is known by God.... 6 Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. ... 11 So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.”** The only identity for believers is the one God and Father and the one Lord Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians, the author shows how love is the foundation and motive for our new life in Christ. In the new creation, Christ’s love compels us to lay down our old creation lives and live in resurrection according to the new creation life within us.

**14 For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 2**

Corinthians 5:14-17

The epistle to the Ephesians is considered one of the most profound letters in the New Testament in terms of revealing the church as the Body of Christ, the mystery of God. God the Father chose us in Him in love (1:4), not in teaching or doctrine or interpretation of the Bible. **“God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us”** (2:4) is the foundation of our salvation. The purpose of Christ making His home in our hearts through faith includes knowing the knowledge surpassing love of Christ (3:17-19). The author of Ephesians shares about oneness and maturation in life so that we may hold to truth in love and grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, Christ (4:15) and then, walk in love

(5:2). The church as the bride of Christ experiences the greatest love, even to give oneself up for the other (5:25). And finally, after the armor of God is laid out for the spiritual warrior, the final exhortation is to love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruptibility (6:24).

Colossians 3 says it all: **Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

Colossians 3:12-14

**"Love is the fulfillment of the law."** (Romans 13:10) Every law that God establishes, imposes, and requires is fulfilled by love. And should there be any confusion on what that means, **"For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**" (Galatians 5:14) It seems we often can easily bypass this profound, all-encompassing commandment. The Lord soberly admonished the church in Ephesus with the threat of dire consequences: **"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."** (Revelation 2:3-5)

Should Biblical interpretation be hailed above loving one another? According to the Lord Jesus, the answer is 'No'! The reformation (14-16th centuries) recovered many truths that had been lost or hidden by the Roman Catholic Church. We appreciate and stand on the shoulders of many saints who were persecuted as they simply obeyed the Lord Jesus in their hearts. The persecution often involved interpretations of scripture. However, among many of these reformers, love was often not held in the highest regard. For instance, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin are three key figures leading the reformation and they had vehement disagreements. Many saints were martyred not only by the Roman Catholic church but also by the reformers and established denominations that had formed. The persecutors claimed that the martyrs were deficient in the truth or opposed their interpretation of the Bible and were, therefore, deemed worthy of death. It seemed that each new group identified themselves with a person or certain interpretation of the Bible (e.g. Lutherans, Anabaptists, Reformed theologians, Mennonites, Methodists, Wesleyans), but these groups then persecuted the next new group(s). They did not

keep love in its rightful, highest place. Even some of the great reformers were contentious to the point of division and even killing their brothers over doctrine.

## **Conclusion**

Can we honestly proclaim that in our gathering together and in our identifying ourselves to others (e.g. what church we attend), that we practically “**Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the uniting bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all**”? Ephesians 4:3-6

Why didn't Jesus lay out any format for meetings or groupings of believers? The Old Testament gives intricate details of the tabernacle, temple, services, how to gather, etc. which typify God's desire for ONE people, ONE nation, ONE race, ONE kingly priesthood that represent Him as the ONE true God. Israel had a clear identity in God and they were supposed to obey all of His commands. They did not, and as a result they were taken captive and the temple with all its offerings, liturgy, etc. was destroyed. The Lord Jesus did not preach anything of how to gather together or how to hold meetings. He preached love and obedience to His word through the Spirit that would come after His death and resurrection.

The book of Hebrews shows that Christ and the New Covenant are superior to angels, to Moses, to the Aaronic Priesthood, and to the Old Covenant with all its ordinances, offerings and sacrifices. Why does the author of Hebrews exhort the readers to “**Go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore**”? It seems reasonable that the author was directing the believers to leave Judaism with its culture, its Jewish race alone, its preferences (myriads of ordinances, practices, and rituals), and its scriptural interpretations. The author also emphasized the need for love among believers (Hebrews 6:10, 10:24, 13:1), which is based on identifying with Christ and His New Covenant alone without distinction of persons.

The book of Revelation reveals the New Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ. **I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.** (Revelation 21:2) **Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.** (Revelation 21:9-10) This bride, the New Jerusalem, is the universal Body of Christ as His expression. It is not a physical city with gold streets and pearly gates which are metaphors for its

reality. The New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ is constituted with all the redeemed people of God throughout the ages. Note that God called these redeemed people: **With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom** (Revelation 5:9-10).

The New Jerusalem is the ultimate identity of all believers in Christ, all of God's redeemed. Formerly, we were many tribes and peoples with many languages, forming many nations. In the New Jerusalem (as in the Body of Christ today) we are one people, one nation. There is diversity in the Body of Christ, but absolute oneness. For instance, the gates of the New Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve (12) sons of Israel (formerly Jacob), and the foundations of the New Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve (12) apostles of Christ (Revelation 21:10-14). They are part of the one city of God, the one bride of Christ, the one expression of God.

I believe the three most important elements of meeting together are the Lord's name, His word (Revelation 3:8) and loving one another. In other words, our identification is Christ Himself and our mode of operation depends on our loving obedience to His word. Based on these three simple truths, I believe it is possible to assemble together as believers in Christ without the distinction or division of denominations and independent groupings that take on a particular identity. I believe the New Testament confirms that our only "group" identity in Christ is that we are the one race, the one royal priesthood, the one holy nation, and the one people of God as part of the one new man in the new creation. However, to experience and produce this requires us to "go outside the camp" of the present paradigm of church practice.

**"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."** (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35; Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)