

Membership Is Identity

Scripture: Romans 11:17; 1 Corinthians 6:20; Galatians 2:20

Code: B130123

Our society is suffering from an identity crisis. Collectively and individually, people today don't have a strong sense of who they are, what they want, or how to achieve it. They drift anchorless through life, following the whims and fads of the world instead of accepting responsibility and pursuing maturity.

Christians don't need to struggle with that kind of identity crisis. We've been redeemed and claimed by Christ, brought into His family, and are being transformed into His likeness. To some degree, it should be difficult to tell where He stops and where you start, so to speak. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

That glorious truth describes the spiritual state of every believer. We are no longer isolated and alone—the Lord bought us with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20) and grafted us into His family (Romans 11:17). We bear His name, and our transformed lives are a testimony to His love and power. Christ's sacrifice on our behalf establishes our new identity for eternity—we are His church, His body, and His bride.

But if individually we are identified with Christ, why then do so many Christians refuse to identify with the church—a collection of others likewise identified with the Savior? Why do they refuse church membership and eschew fellowship with a local congregation? If the Lord has made us all one family in eternity, why do so many believers spend so much time here on earth avoiding one another?

Paul sternly warned Timothy to not be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord (2 Timothy 1:8). In his case, Timothy had real reasons to be afraid of publicly proclaiming his faith and identifying with the church—he faced the constant threat of physical persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

The majority of believers today won't ever face that kind of pressure. Instead, the resistance to identify with the church is born out of the fear of man. In our perpetually shallow and increasingly atheistic culture, there's nothing *cool* about the church. So rather than being saddled with the stigma of buttoned-down religion, some believers try to discreetly live out their faith through loose affiliation with one—and sometimes more than one—congregation. Others just avoid the church altogether, ashamed that anyone might think they belong.

The idea of giving in to that kind of meager pressure would be laughable if so many Christians weren't doing it every day. But rather than proudly and publicly uniting with other believers, they chase fickle popularity. Maybe you've been tempted at times to do the same.

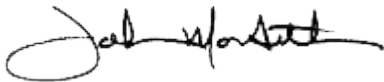
What you do in the face of that temptation says a lot about the true state of your heart. The best indication of your priorities is how and where you spend your time and energy, whether it's a political movement, a school board, a neighborhood committee, or a fan club.

And of all the organizations you could belong to, the church is by far the most important. Your commitment to and identification with your local congregation speaks volumes about who you are and what matters most to you. In fact, your participation in your church is so much more than a once- or twice-a-week activity—it's a gathering of people who are no longer citizens of this world; a fellowship of men and women who have been transformed into new creatures and united in faith. The church is a foretaste of the glories that await us in eternity.

So if you claim to love the Lord but refuse to identify with His people, it raises understandable questions about the veracity of your love. At the same time, if your reputation with the unsaved world means enough to keep you away from the church, you have cause for serious concerns about whether you've truly repented and believed in the first place.

One other thing to consider when it comes to reputations: it's true yours could suffer in some circles if you publicly identify with your local church—it might even be humiliating for you.

But that's nothing compared to the humiliations Christ willingly and sacrificially suffered on our behalf. And if the Lord is willing to associate Himself with weak, sinful people like us, we can't keep Him or His church at arm's length. If He's not ashamed to call us His, we cannot be ashamed to call Him ours.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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